

A Delicate Balancing Act: Exploring how Violence is Resisted or Perpetuated in Singapore's Multifront Response to the Israel-Palestine Conflict

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Abstract: The attacks on October 7th, 2023, by Hamas and the subsequent Israeli response have unprecedentedly pushed the Israel-Palestinian conflict into the limelight of Singaporean society. In its delicate balancing act - to manage domestic demands and international interests - the Singapore government has positioned itself as a neutral arbitrator between pro-Palestinian and pro-Israeli forces. This strategic negotiation is exemplified in the country's foreign and domestic policy decisions aimed at managing the inherent tensions between: (1) Singapore's special relationship with Israel; (2) its geopolitical implications as a "Chinese nut in a Malay nutcracker"; and (3) growing domestic and international pro-Palestinian sentiment. This paper examines the Singapore government's efforts to balance these competing forces with the ultimate goal of preserving domestic public harmony in a multiethnic society amidst heightened geopolitical pressures. In conclusion, Singapore's navigation of these competing forces underscores its steadfast commitment to maintaining domestic stability and upholding core principles.

Keywords: *Singapore, Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, Israel, Palestine, Civil Society, Foreign Policy, Domestic Policy, Violence*

Note: This paper takes into account events up to August 2025.

Introduction

We have always said that Israel had a right to defend itself. Unfortunately, Israel's response has gone too far and its actions have caused a terrible humanitarian disaster; and the restrictions imposed on the delivery of humanitarian supplies are completely unacceptable. In our opinion, it may even be a likely breach of international humanitarian law. So it cannot be justified. We join countries around the world to call for an immediate ceasefire; for the unhindered delivery of humanitarian aid; for the protection of civilians; and also for the return of hostages. Beyond the current crisis itself, Singapore also supports the right of the Palestinian people to their own homeland. This has to be done as part of a negotiated two-state solution, because that is the only way for a comprehensive, just and durable solution to this long-standing Israel-Palestine conflict.

- Singaporean Prime Minister (PM) Lawrence Wong

During a joint press conference with visiting French President Emmanuel Macron, PM Lawrence Wong made comments representing the strongest criticism by Singaporean leadership since the Hamas terrorist attack on October 7th, 2023 (Jacob, 2025). As global sentiments surrounding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict grew progressively fervent, Singapore also became increasingly embroiled in the ensuing geostrategic and racial-religious tensions. The nation's position as a "Chinese nut in a Malay nutcracker" (denoting its majority Chinese population among Muslim-majority neighbours), its close historical and current security ties with Israel, and the rallying of civil society in support of Palestine have contributed to the complexity of managing the issue.

In light of this, the three broad themes that have consistently underpinned the government's position regarding the Israel-Palestine conflict can be gleaned from PM Wong's statement: (1) Israel's right to defend itself; (2) the urgent humanitarian situation in Gaza; and (3) the negotiation of a two-state solution as a means to end the longstanding conflict. The continued emphasis on these three points encapsulates the ongoing delicate balancing act (Cheong, 2017) and strategic negotiation of tensions needed to navigate pro-Palestinian domestic forces while also acknowledging Singapore's special relationship with Israel dating back to its immediate post-independence years.

On the International Front

The defining aspects of Singapore's foreign policy approach regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are its historical ties to Israel and its stated commitment to international law. This section examines Singapore's navigation of these tensions.

Historical Ties

The similarities between Israel's and Singapore's struggles and timeframes of gaining independence tie the two countries together through a shared historical experience and a greater concern for sovereignty. Most significantly, both must contend with their geopolitical statuses as smaller nations surrounded by larger Muslim-majority neighbours. Indeed, Mr Bilahari Kausikan, Chairman of the Middle East Institute and former permanent secretary at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), described the two countries as "small, improbable, and outliers in their respective regions" (Lim, 2019). Thus, security is an undeniably significant national interest for both.

Singapore and Israel's special relationship is further reflected in the modelling of the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) and its conscription system after the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), and by how Israeli military advisers were brought in to assist in training the SAF in early post-Independence Singapore (L. Wong, 2023; Kassab, 2024). Today, Singapore is one of Israel's largest defence importers – the country's use of Israeli military technology is partly why Singapore has one of the strongest militaries in Southeast Asia despite its small size (Boehler, 2016). To give an example, the Republic of Singapore Navy employs the use of the Blue Spear SSM, a high-subsonic missile that is "immune to GPS disruptions"; this technology is jointly developed by Israel Aerospace Industries (IAI) and ST Engineering Land Systems from Singapore (Ng, 2024). The two countries' shared identity and interests as geopolitical outliers have thus been partly responsible for their continued bilateral partnership. As Mr Bilahari Kausikan (2019) argued, "...both must always be outliers if [they]

are to continue to survive and prosper. If Israel becomes just another Middle Eastern country, or Singapore becomes just another Southeast Asian country, [Singapore] cannot survive, let alone prosper".

Respect for International Law

Another key pillar defining Singapore's foreign policy is its stated commitment to being a staunch advocate of international law. This can be seen in two noteworthy instances: (1) the public condemnation and imposition of unilateral sanctions on Russia following its invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (MFA, 2022) and (2) the implementation of resolutions passed by the United Nations Security Council that required Singapore's imposition of sanctions and arms embargoes on other countries (Singapore Customs, n.d.). The importance of international law is reflected in Singapore's foreign policy since its post-independence years. According to Ambassador-at-large Tommy Koh (2025), founding father Lee Kuan Yew was particularly "scrupulous" about the need for Singapore to conform to international law and would "drop ideas that were not consistent." This is due to international law's usefulness to "promote and defend Singapore's national interests", particularly as a small state (Koh, 2025).

In this regard, Singapore has largely utilised "international law" to justify its actions pertaining to the Israel-Palestinian conflict. For example, during the initial stages of the Israel-Palestinian conflict, Singapore consistently voiced support for Israel's right to self-defence (within the compliance of international laws of war), condemnation of Hamas, and the need for a negotiated two-state solution (MFA, 2023). The nation's leaning on the authority of international law creates a buffer to perform its delicate balancing act: Singapore can avoid condemning Israel's actions as a war crime while enabling it to condemn Israel's actions on humanitarian terms. In doing so, Singapore has notably abstained from explicitly labelling Israel's actions in the Gaza Strip as a genocide: the state has yet to take a position regarding South Africa's pending case before the International Court of Justice (ICJ) under the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, instead opting to "let due legal process run its course" (Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2024).

Only recently, in July 2025, did Singapore's MFA issue a statement saying that the famine caused by Israel's denial of aid constitutes a violation of international humanitarian law (MFA, 2025b). This statement came amidst Israel's attempts to occupy Gaza becoming increasingly clear violations of international law in 2024 (Rankin, 2025), with more countries and leading figures renouncing Israel's actions (Amnesty International UK, 2025), along with reports from international organisations like UNICEF (2025) and the World Health Organisation (2025) concerning the severe risk of famine in Gaza. It was therefore no surprise when PM Lawrence Wong remarked, "Israel's response has gone too far and its actions have caused a terrible humanitarian disaster; and the restrictions imposed on the delivery of humanitarian supplies are completely unacceptable" (Jacob, 2025).

Despite a gradual shift in attitude that resulted in the Singapore government recalibrating its stance – from strongly defending Israel's right to self-defence to emphasising humanitarian concerns – Singapore's approach to the conflict has not only allowed it to keep a consistent stance regarding respect for international law, but also accommodated both its historical ties with Israel as well as domestic pro-Palestinian voices.

Accordingly, one can see how Singapore's small size and influence, racial demographic vis-à-vis its neighbours, and complex web of international relations and trade partnerships have shaped

Singapore's "friend to all" approach. Singapore continually balances various interests in response to shifting global trends. While this approach has previously served its foreign policy goals well, as deglobalisation increases (Keller & Marold, 2023) and more international conflict arises, Singapore's balancing act might occasionally prove unsustainable for its national interests. In such cases, national goals and non-negotiable ideologies might take the fore. When combined with evolving global issues such as an increased call to abide by international law and neighbouring countries' sentiments against racial issues, domestic interests could become more pronounced than Singapore's balancing strategy in influencing foreign policy.

Racial and Religious Harmony

Singapore's initial support for Israel's right to self-defence incited great displeasure among many pro-Palestinian supporters within and without Singapore (Ang, 2023; Y. Tham, 2024). Importantly, both local and neighbouring Muslim populations – such as in Malaysia and Indonesia – were disappointed with Singapore's seemingly neutral position, interpreting its neutrality as a form of complicity with Israel's actions (Abdullah & Perera, 2024; Rajanthran, 2023).

Externally, Singapore's foreign policy stance has exacerbated its precarious position as a "Chinese nut in a Malay nutcracker" – its connotation explained above (Rahim, 2009) – by antagonising its Palestine-sympathetic neighbours. The fact that Malaysia and Indonesia have never recognised the establishment of an independent Israeli state (Mohamad, 2023), while Singapore enjoys a special relationship with them, highlights the increasing contention of the nation's position as tensions surrounding the Israel-Palestine conflict persist.

The Israel-Hamas conflict, in particular, is an issue that many Singaporeans across racial and religious groups feel strongly about...This is why the Government has taken a careful approach in managing public discussions, to avoid polarisation of our society on the issue and damage to our cohesion and harmony.

- Mr K Shanmugam (2025)

The Palestinian issue in Singapore occupies an intersecting junction between (1) Singapore's foreign policy priorities and (2) the state's core ideology of racial and religious harmony. Hence, the government has been compelled to navigate the issue with heightened sensitivity and elevate itself as a neutral arbitrator to determine the permissible boundaries of such discourse, while at times asserting itself as an active participant by moderating between Pro-Palestinian and Pro-Israeli camps. For example, in 2024, when the Israeli Embassy created a social media post stating that "Palestine" is not mentioned in the Quran, then-Minister for Law and current Minister of Home Affairs (MHA) K. Shanmugam requested that the embassy remove the post on the grounds that it undermined Singapore's "safety, security and harmony" (D. Tham, 2024). Notably, Shanmugam also highlights that the Israeli Embassy's actions "risk inflaming tensions (...) and can also put the Jewish community here at risk", further articulating that "[Singapore has] made a clear commitment to protect all our minorities, which, in Singapore's context, includes the Muslim and Jewish communities" (Koh, 2024).

Similarly, the government's decision to ban public assemblies following the initial outbreak of the conflict was also rooted in racial and religious considerations, stating that "the peace and harmony between different races and religions in Singapore should not be taken for granted" (Lee, 2023).

Hence, the government's quelling of potentially destabilising activities is primarily justified by the state's prioritisation of racial and religious harmony through active censure of civil society (Chua, 2003).

While the government has largely utilised a "top-down" approach in managing such discourse, the 2025 General Election has compelled the government to more explicitly acknowledge and respond to public discourse as voters are able to exert pressure on political actors through the ballot box. Domestically, Singapore risked dissatisfying its Muslim constituencies (comprising around 15.1% of the total electorate), who share a similar religious identity with Palestinians (National Population and Talent Division, 2024). Hence, the salience of the Palestinian issue posed an electoral concern during the then-upcoming 2025 General Elections for both the People's Action Party (PAP) and Workers' Party (WP), prompting responses from both to address voter dissatisfaction (Abdullah & Perera, 2024). For example, the WP moved to include the recognition of a Palestinian state in its manifesto (The Workers' Party, 2025), and moved veteran Member of Parliament (MP) Faisal Manap away from his stronghold district of Aljunied to Tampines. To further elaborate, the Tampines constituency was estimated to comprise 23.6% Malay voters (Mungcal et al., 2025), and was home to the then-unpopular Minister-in-charge of Muslim Affairs Masagos Zulkifli (The Online Citizen, 2025).

Domestic Policy and the Perpetuation of Violence

Despite Singaporean civil society's increased passion regarding the Palestinian cause, limited political allowances have resulted in constrained avenues for expressing solidarity and mobilising support. The state's prioritisation of domestic stability over civil society's ability to engage in activism for international causes is encapsulated by Minister Shanmugam's emphasis that Singapore cannot afford for external events to affect its "precious peace" (Sun, 2024). Hence, in extension of the state's aforementioned neutral arbitrator, it employs a tactic of calibrated liberalisation to carefully control political allowance and concessions to the Pro-Palestinian camp while framing its shifting of stance as a response to civil society's activism as opposed to a proactive policy change (Abdullah, 2025). This slow calibration allows for the maintenance of social stability while ensuring that the state does not get backed into a corner by the dual pressures of domestic activism and diplomatic considerations.

Following the initial attack on Israel launched by the Palestinian militant group, Hamas, on October 7th, 2023 ("Israel-Hamas War") and the ensuing Israeli counterattack implicating civilians in the Gaza Strip, the Singapore government quickly moved to ban public assemblies relating to the conflict at the Speaker's Corner, the city-state's only sanctioned location for legalised protest (Singapore Police Force, 2023). This marked a drastic reversal from the decade prior, when the government permitted a rally in solidarity with the suffering of Gazans immediately following 2014's Operation Protective Edge. The authorities justified this recent decision by stating that the "sensitivity of the topic and the volatility of the situation overseas" could give rise to public disorder.

It is important to note that public assemblies relating to international causes have not been uncommon since the establishment of the Speaker's Corner in 2000. Past events held in solidarity with international causes include protests against government oppression in Myanmar (2009); support for Malaysia's Bersih 3.0 rally (2011); protests in solidarity with the Occupy Central Movement of Hong Kong (2014), and in solidarity with the victims of the LGBT Pulse nightclub

shooting in Orlando, Florida (2016). Most notably, two demonstrations relating to the conflict in Gaza were permitted by authorities in 2014, one of which attracted over 1,000 participants, making it the “most attended internationally focused protest” in Singaporean history (Stephens, 2023).

The contrasting policy regarding Gaza-related public assemblies reflects the Singapore government's evolving perception regarding the conflict's domestic implications. While public assemblies relating to race and religion have consistently been prohibited, the approval of the 2014 protests and the 2023 ban suggest that the issue has shifted from a secular political crisis to one with racial and religious sensitivities. Evidence suggesting that racial and religious considerations have permeated the government's decision-making process includes the Singapore Police Force's statement emphasising, in relation to the 2023 ban, that “peace and harmony between different races and religions in Singapore should not be taken for granted” (Singapore Police Force, 2023), as well as an interview with then-outgoing PM Lee Hsien Loong in 2024 stating that “Muslims in Singapore have become very aroused by what is happening in Gaza” (Prime Minister's Office, 2024).

The government's reframing of the ongoing war through a racial-religious lens today, as compared to 2014, is not completely unwarranted. The consequences of the 2023 conflict has proven itself to be religiously-motivated in several ways: (1) the October 7th attacks coincided with the Jewish holiday *Simchat Torah* (Nakhoul & Saul, 2023); (2) Hamas and other Palestinian armed groups codenamed the October 7th attacks *Operation Al-Aqsa Flood*, referencing the Al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem, the third holiest site in Islam, hence implying the attack as a form of jihad (Al Jazeera, 2023); and (3) the coalition of Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu's government in 2023 includes significantly more religious-nationalist and ultra-orthodox parties, compared to 2014 where more secular and centrist political parties dominated the Israeli government's coalition (Ganel, 2023). The historical tensions and conflicts between Israel and Palestine have undoubtedly long contained a religious element. However, given the significant global attention and unprecedented access to live newsfeeds and on-the-ground updates on the conflict (Noureddine, 2023), today, greater concern regarding the potentially destabilising impact of the issue on racial-religious lines can be justified.

Recent Developments

In the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, censorship, strict surveillance, and regulation enacted and enforced through legal instruments can be argued to constitute a form of (non-physical) violence perpetrated against civil society. While done in the name of preventing incidents from sparking division, a refusal to tolerate terrorism, and to maintain social stability (Shanmugam, 2024), international concerns have arisen surrounding the “use of restrictive laws and harassment” against Singaporean civil society (CIVICUS, 2024). In support of this argument, only activist efforts that warranted government response will be analysed as instances of violence against civil society in this essay.

Such laws include banning the public display or wearing of foreign national emblems relating to the Israel-Hamas war without a permit under the Foreign National Emblems (Control of Display) Act, and assemblies at the Speakers' Corner relating to the Israel-Hamas war being made illegal as of October 2023 (S. Wong, 2024). The latter was an addition to the 2009 Public Order Act, broadly criminalising assemblies of one or more individuals in public spaces except when held at the Speakers' Corner with prior permission. In an act of resistance, local activist Gilbert Goh came under

investigation for posting a photo of himself holding a sign advocating for peace in Palestine outside the Speakers' Corner, in violation of the restrictions (Channel News Asia, 2023). This characterisation of an individual engaging in a silent, peaceful demonstration as an "illegal assembly" disrupting public order has been criticised by independent journalist Kirsten Han (2023) as "a weaponisation of the Public Order Act to suppress fundamental rights to assembly and expression." Evidently, the state has broadly wielded the law and the consequent threat of punishment to regulate public expression on the issue and, more often than not, to prohibit such displays altogether – a form of repression of civil society.

Beyond the direct enactment of the law, the threat of surveillance, investigation, and legal action also constitutes a form of non-physical violence that has contributed to an inhospitable environment for civil society expression. In response to the Israeli-Palestinian issue, Singapore's track record of non-violent activism being met with the full force of the law at the state's disposal, including the likes of legal instruments such as the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA) and the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act (MRHA), has simply remained consistent. Mechanisms such as POFMA and MRHA have previously been wielded in response to individuals or publications that threaten racial-religious harmony and social unity, requiring statements to be retracted or for clarifying comments to be posted following what is deemed, respectively, false or potentially divisive (Haciyakupoglu & Wong, 2025). In this case, the force of the law has manifested in cases of open surveillance of social media posts, the questioning of individuals who attended protests affiliated with the issue overseas, and investigations into individuals involved in pro-Palestine activism (Iau, 2024; CNA, 2025). For instance, six suspected participants in a staged solidarity memorial at the National University of Singapore were questioned by the police and had communication devices and clothing linked to the incident seized (CNA, 2025).

As activists continue to resist and express themselves despite these threats, they might be met with a vicious cycle of repression that further reinforces the dampening and self-censorship of civil society, as well as the state's justification for its strict controls in the first place, highlighting how violence is perpetuated on a legal and civil scale.

Recognising Concessions to Civil Society

However, the government's response to the issue has not been wholly repressive. They have also endeavoured to foster better relations with the nation's increasingly vocal and determined civil society. Scholars Walid J. Abdullah and Emily Perera (2024) asserted that the government has engaged in a balancing act in its responses to the issue, a balance in which "clear concessions" have been made to pro-Palestinian supporters among Singaporean civil society. These include encouraging official avenues for raising funds for Gaza (which involved international coordination with regional partners in the Middle East to deliver tranches of humanitarian aid), the government's official endorsement of a public event held in solidarity with Palestine – the Gaza Monologues – for the first time, and the fielding of questions regarding the Israeli-Palestinian issue across several parliamentary sessions (MFA, 2025a; RICE, 2024).

At face value, these concessions might be interpreted as a positive shift towards a two-way relationship between the state and civil society. However, as these shifts remain aligned with Singapore's foreign policy stance on the issue and domestic priority of maintaining social harmony, it

remains to be seen whether such concessions would be granted to activist efforts that fall outside these criteria.

Furthermore, these concessions do not erase the persistent weaponisation of the law and domestic policy against activism deemed disruptive by the state. As it stands, civil society activity, both related and unrelated to the Israel-Palestine issue, is only permitted in a manner that is firmly controlled by the government. Through dictating the content and execution of civil society efforts, activity outside these bounds continues to be discouraged, suppressed, and made illegal to limit potential threats to social stability (Stephens, 2023). Ultimately, the intentional production of a civic environment in which fears of government scrutiny and legal retribution encourage regular self-censorship perpetuates a form of violence against civil society that deliberately hinders freedom of expression.

Extrapolating to the Future

The government has utilised domestic policy and legal instruments to regulate civil society activity, such as the managed liberalisation of discussions (Toh, 2023), in a manner that some have argued is “repressive” rather than balanced (CIVICUS, 2024). In response to pre-existing regulations on civil society expression, pro-Palestinian voices and activism in the wake of October 2023 have been either defiant or creative in approach. For every instance of resistance that is met with a swift government response, numerous others have innovatively circumvented legal restrictions. Official publications such as *Why Palestine?: Reflections from Singapore* (Abdullah, 2025), social media accounts such as @sgforpalestine48 and @sgacadboycoott on Instagram, community-led events like the Singapore Palestine Film Festival (n.d.), and independent fundraising efforts like the Love Aid Singapore polyclinic in central Gaza (Walden, 2025), are but a few examples of creative forms of expression in protest of Singapore’s official stance that successfully toed the line of official restrictions.

Regardless, pro-Palestinian activism efforts as a whole have thus far been insufficient in yielding conducive two-way communication with the state. Acts of solidarity and calls for divestment in defiance of state controls have instead unintentionally reinforced the state’s ability to dictate civil society discourse and maintain political legitimacy, as most of these acts ultimately occur within sanctioned boundaries. This goes to show that concessions on the part of the government are not a show of its policies failing or its inevitable succumbence to increasing domestic pressure, but rather an intelligent and peaceful manoeuvre towards the ultimate goal of preserving domestic public harmony in a multiethnic society amidst heightened geopolitical pressures.

Conclusion

This essay has demonstrated and analysed the negotiation of tensions among: (1) global developments that call for a reaffirmation of Singapore’s principles; (2) shifting domestic sentiments regarding international issues; and (3) the nation’s interests and core principles. The negotiation of these tensions is further influenced by the unique characteristics of Singapore’s geopolitical context and draconian laws amidst a broader trend of calibrated liberalisation.

Overall, we argue that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict presents a unique case study of Singaporean civil society and its management as it: (1) served as the political awakening for many in a generally

depoliticised society (Abdullah, 2025); (2) marked the first time in recent history in which foreign events intersected so deeply with domestic race and religion issues; and (3) sparked an unprecedented level of defiance and innovation in expressions of dissent in an otherwise tightly controlled civic space. Yet, as the issue has also seen the continuation of the government's calibrated allowances for civil society expression, it remains to be seen what long-term impacts the unique circumstances of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will have on Singapore's civic environment.

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