

The War's Shockwaves: How Does Singapore's Model for Racial and Religious Harmony Respond

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Singapore attaches utmost importance to racial and religious harmony and recognizes that its impressive success in this critical area is not to be taken for granted and that maintaining it requires ongoing vigilance. It is no surprise, therefore, that in the aftermath of Hamas's October 7 terror attack and the subsequent Israeli military operation in the Gaza Strip, the island's highly shrewd sociopolitical senses responded powerfully, including with practical measures. Singapore and Israel exist in fundamentally different environments and contexts. At the same time the Singaporean case can offer us an intellectual challenge.

In a highly challenging geopolitical and multicultural reality, the concept of social harmony and cohesion, with an emphasis [on racial and religious harmony](#) as a foundational value and basis for national existence, has become rooted in Singapore. This leading value is translated into a broad and successful sociopolitical effort that is guided by significant messages, such as the importance of tolerance, dialogue, mutual acceptance, and respect. Moreover, it is strongly stressed that this peace, sense of a safe space, and harmony achieved in Singapore should not be taken for granted. This obligates not only ongoing activity but sharp vigilance on the part of all. Indeed, for almost the last six decades, Singapore has astutely and successfully navigated a complex geopolitical and demographic situation: a small, city-state with no strategic depth, located in a Muslim-majority region, with Malaysia to the north and the huge Indonesian archipelago to the south. Moreover, most of the island's population of about 6 million people (including permanent residents, foreign workers, and visiting students) are of Chinese origin. Joining them is also a sizable Malay-Muslim population – the largest minority group on the island – which has strong historical,

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cultural, ethnic, and linguistic ties to the Malay-Muslim population in Malaysia. The second largest minority is of Indian origin.

Singapore, which understands the critical importance of maintaining the rich fabric of multiculturalism, keeps a close and watchful eye even on developments and events far from its shores that could negatively affect it. Not surprisingly, therefore, in the aftermath of the barbarous Hamas terror attack on October 7 and the Israeli military campaign that began immediately thereafter, Singapore's shrewd sociopolitical senses responded powerfully, fearing that shockwaves would reach the island state. Perhaps Singaporean eyes were also looking toward Malaysia, which is decidedly opposed to Israel and openly sympathetic to Hamas, with [ties to the organization's leadership](#). In response to events, authorities in Singapore relayed messages through several channels: the importance of social harmony and the need to ensure that the conflict in the Middle East does not stir up emotions, including as a result of false information disseminated on social media; the years-long harmony and tranquility are not to be taken for granted, and therefore citizens must stay vigilant and to notify authorities on suspicious activities; identity politics must be avoided; and laws and societal norms must be observed in order to maintain the harmony.

At the same time while the Israel-Hamas war rages, Singapore wants to pursue what is described as a [principled and balanced approach](#) to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. On the one hand, therefore, Singapore – which has long enjoyed solid friendly relations with Israel, including much appreciation of Israel's role in supporting the building its of its defense capabilities – issued [an uncompromising condemnation of Hamas's terror attack](#), which it described as an act of terrorism that involved also extreme brutality and cannot be justified by any means. It also called for the immediate and unconditional release of all civilian hostages and affirmed Israel's right to defend itself. It is impressive that despite the ongoing conflict, Singapore recently [appointed its first resident ambassador](#) to the State of Israel. On the other hand, [messages sent by Singapore's leaders to Palestinian Authority leaders](#) expressed their condolences on the loss of Palestinian civilian life and their concern over the dire humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip. Singapore's [Minister of Foreign Affairs](#) also stated that "all countries must ensure that if military action is taken in exercising this right of self-defense, they must abide by the principles of necessity and proportionality" and must comply with the laws of war. Singapore also voted in favor of a United National General Assembly resolution in December calling for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza,

having voted in favor of a similar UN resolution in October. In addition, Singapore reiterates its basic principled position on the need for a political resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict based on the two-state solution.

In tandem, authorities in Singapore issued advisories containing general instructions for the public. [One was directed at the foreign workforce](#) in the country, who number [around 1.5 million](#) – including almost [1 million from Malaysia](#). The advisory was likely directed primarily at these Malaysian workers, especially given that many of them cross the Singapore Causeway every day. Understanding that so many civilian deaths evoke emotions, the foreign workers are urged to remain calm and ensure that racial and religious harmony in Singapore is not affected by external developments. The advisory states that Singapore has zero tolerance for any forms of extremism, violence, and terrorism; any donations to help victims of the conflict must be done through official channels; citizens are banned from writing, posting, or sharing any information in-person or online which may stir up emotions; they must not support or import foreign politics into Singapore or spread unverified information; they are forbidden to support any terrorist organization, including, for example, by public display of flags and posters; they are urged to be vigilant and report any suspicious activities or persons who may display signs of radicalization. In [another advisory](#), the public display of emblems connected to the war between Israel and Hamas was banned. The advisory also stated that displaying any item that carries the logo of a terrorist organization or militant groups, such as Hamas or its armed wing, al-Qassam Brigades, is prohibited in particular. In another effort in this context to ensure that social harmony was maintained, the [Singapore police issued an advisory](#) about public events and assemblies. In practice, and unlike many places across the world, there have been no pro-Palestinian or anti-Israeli protests in Singapore since the war broke out.

In addition, [the Mufti of Singapore wrote early in the conflict to the country's Chief Rabbi](#) that there is no justification for any form of violence and brutality on civilians, including those by Hamas, or in any retaliatory response. He also expressed the hope that the Jewish and Muslim communities in the conflict zones could live together with a different model of respect, tolerance and harmony and that it will be possible to share the Singapore model of coexistence with the communities in the affected regions. In response, the Chief Rabbi of [the small Singapore Jewish community](#) said that the Jewish community is grateful for the government's zero-tolerance policy on hate speech, religious hatred, and

incitement. He stressed the importance of strengthening ties between the Jewish and Muslim communities to protect and maintain the delicate fabric of Singaporean society, which is a role model for religious tolerance. He also expressed the sympathy of his community for the innocent Palestinian civilians who "lost their lives in this senseless conflict" and expressed hope for a permanent peace between Israel and the Palestinian people. [The Mufti also published an advisory](#) to guide Muslims in Singapore in their response to overseas conflicts such as the ongoing conflict between Israel and Hamas; thus, the advisory is said to help them to manage the impacts of such conflicts on their religiosity in a "wise, constructive and positive way."

How Singapore responded is interesting evidence of the particular model it has built with regard to racial and religious harmony in a multicultural reality, which should be understood in the historical, political, cultural, and social context of the country and as part of its formation of a national identity. The roots can be traced back to the country's founding father, Lee Kuan Yew, including to the seminal speech he gave on August 9, 1965, when [he announced Singapore's separation from the Malaysian Federation](#) after about two years of membership and declared independence: "This is not a Malay nation; this is not a Chinese nation; this is not an Indian nation. Everybody will have his place: equal; language, culture, religion." In the background was the collective memory, which seems to serve as a warning, of the [violent racial riots](#) between Malay-Muslim and Chinese groups in 1964. Singapore was recently ranked high [in Southeast and South Asia](#) in terms of inter-religious tolerance, pluralism, and multiculturalism, as well as compatibility of all its religious communities with the state culture and values. Behind this Singaporean success is a decades-long national effort that has been spearheaded by the country's leaders using a variety of mechanisms and systems, with the necessary cooperation of leaders and activists from the various component communities. Among the messages relayed by the state there is a recurring theme whereby a joint effort by every citizen is necessary for mutual acceptance, building trust, and dialogue, since the social harmony that the country has worked so hard to achieve must not be taken for granted and is always subject to potential threats. Singapore's lawmakers have stepped in to help protect this social harmony with [comprehensive legislation](#), and the results have been impressive, notwithstanding many challenges. Salient among these challenges over the past two decades has been a global [increase in Islamic radicalization](#). It seems, however, that in Singapore the phenomenon has only been marginal and has included only a small number of locals involved in global jihadi organizations.

Alongside social harmony, Singapore's particular model is strongly linked to the foundations established by Lee and to his legacy, such as the importance of social order, discipline at various levels, and [meritocracy](#) – that is, a state based on a broad approach whereby people are chosen to positions of power and influence on the basis of their skills, capabilities, and merits alone. This system has achieved much. At the same time, it seems that there is a growing understanding of the need to adapt the approach according to ever-changing circumstances. To be sure, some contend that there are certain strict regulations and legislation in Singapore that diverge from Western democratic norms. However, Singaporean citizens, despite everything, benefit from a decent unwritten social contract between them and the ruler, that is, the state. Earlier this year, Singapore was [ranked at the top of the global Good Government index](#), which tracks the effectiveness of governments around the world. Indeed, Singapore proved it was highly efficient in its handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. Taking a broad view of the outcomes and the welfare of its citizens, Singapore presents an impressive model of [good governance](#), with evident rewards: Singaporean citizens enjoy a high standard and quality of life and a very high level of personal security; the healthcare system is highly advanced; its education system is guided by the values of achievement and excellence; a centralized authority provides the population with adequate housing solutions; and citizens also benefit from a judicial system that insists on the highest standards of equality before the law.

In conclusion, in relation to the issue of racial and religious harmony, the case of Singapore provides an impressive model. Its main elements include: a shared and predominant national vision; a shared value system, which solidify the national foundations; appropriate national messages, marked by clarity, determination, unity, and consistency; a high level of compatibility between the values of the various ethnic and religious communities and the national values and culture; and rules of public behavior that are designed to ensure that the vision and national values are realized. No less important, despite the success of the model, authorities send out a consistent national message to ensure that there is no sense of complacency or smugness and call for constant vigilance.

While it is true that the Israeli context is fundamentally different, an examination of the case of Singapore can offer us an intellectual challenge – at least in terms of our domestic behavior, and maybe more.

Editors of the series: Anat Kurtz, Eldad Shavit and Judith Rosen