

From the ashes of Gaza

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In the face of Israel's latest onslaught, the only option for Palestinian nationalism is to embrace a one-state solution.

The assault on Gaza, planned over six months and executed with perfect timing, was designed largely, as Neve Gordon has rightly observed, to help the incumbent parties triumph in the forthcoming Israeli elections. The dead Palestinians are little more than election fodder in a cynical contest between the right and the far right in Israel. Washington and its EU allies, perfectly aware that Gaza was about to be assaulted, as in the case of Lebanon in 2006, sit back and watch.

Washington, as is its wont, blames the pro-Hamas Palestinians, with Obama and Bush singing from the same AIPAC hymn sheet. The EU politicians, having observed the build-up, the siege, the collective punishment inflicted on Gaza, the targeting of civilians etc (for all the gory detail, see Harvard scholar Sara Roy's chilling essay in the London Review of Books) were convinced that it was the rocket attacks that had "provoked" Israel but called on both sides to end the violence, with nil effect. The moth-eaten Mubarak dictatorship in Egypt and Nato's favourite Islamists in Ankara failed to register even a symbolic protest by recalling their ambassadors from Israel. China and Russia did not convene a meeting of the UN security council to discuss the crisis.

As result of official apathy, one outcome of this latest attack will be to inflame Muslim communities throughout the world and swell the ranks of those very organisations that the west claims it is combating in the "war against terror".

The bloodshed in Gaza raises broader strategic questions for both sides, issues related to recent history. One fact that needs to be recognised is that there is no Palestinian Authority. There never was one. The Oslo Accords were an unmitigated disaster for the Palestinians, creating a set of disconnected and shrivelled Palestinian ghettos under the permanent watch of a brutal enforcer. The PLO, once the repository of Palestinian hope, became little more than a supplicant for EU money.

Western enthusiasm for democracy stops when those opposed to its policies are elected to office. The west and Israel tried everything to secure a Fatah victory: Palestinian voters rebuffed the concerted threats and bribes of the "international community" in a campaign that saw Hamas members and other oppositionists routinely detained or assaulted by the IDF, their posters confiscated or destroyed, US and EU funds channelled into the Fatah campaign, and US congressmen announcing that Hamas should not be allowed to run.

Even the timing of the election was set by the determination to rig the outcome. Scheduled for the summer of 2005, it was delayed till January 2006 to give Abbas time to distribute assets in Gaza – in the words of an Egyptian intelligence officer, "the public will then support the Authority against Hamas."

Popular desire for a clean broom after ten years of corruption, bullying and bluster under Fatah proved stronger than all of this. Hamas's electoral triumph was treated as an ominous sign of rising

fundamentalism, and a fearsome blow to the prospects of peace with Israel, by rulers and journalists across the Atlantic world. Immediate financial and diplomatic pressures were applied to force Hamas to adopt the same policies as those of the party it had defeated at the polls. Uncompromised by the Palestinian Authority's combination of greed and dependency, the self-enrichment of its servile spokesmen and policemen, and their acquiescence in a "peace process" that has brought only further expropriation and misery to the population under them, Hamas offered the alternative of a simple example. Without any of the resources of its rival, it set up clinics, schools, hospitals, vocational training and welfare programmes for the poor. Its leaders and cadres lived frugally, within reach of ordinary people.

It is this response to everyday needs that has won Hamas the broad base of its support, not daily recitation of verses from the Koran. How far its conduct in the second Intifada has given it an additional degree of credibility is less clear. Its armed attacks on Israel, like those of Fatah's Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade or Islamic Jihad, have been retaliations against an occupation far more deadly than any actions it has ever undertaken. Measured on the scale of IDF killings, Palestinian strikes have been few and far between. The asymmetry was starkly exposed during Hamas's unilateral ceasefire, begun in June 2003, and maintained throughout the summer, despite the Israeli campaign of raids and mass arrests that followed, in which some 300 Hamas cadres were seized from the West Bank.

On August 19 2003, a self-proclaimed "Hamas" cell from Hebron, disowned and denounced by the official leadership, blew up a bus in west Jerusalem, upon which Israel promptly assassinated the Hamas ceasefire's negotiator, Ismail Abu Shanab. Hamas, in turn, responded. In return, the Palestinian Authority and Arab states cut funding to its charities and, in September 2003, the EU declared the whole Hamas movement to be a terrorist organization – a longstanding demand of Tel Aviv.

What has actually distinguished Hamas in a hopelessly unequal combat is not dispatch of suicide bombers, to which a range of competing groups resorted, but its superior discipline – demonstrated by its ability to enforce a self-declared ceasefire against Israel over the past year. All civilian deaths are to be condemned, but since Israel is their principal practitioner, Euro-American cant serves only to expose those who utter it. Overwhelmingly, the boot of murder is on the other foot, ruthlessly stamped into Palestine by a modern army equipped with jets, tanks and missiles in the longest-armed oppression of modern history.

"Nobody can reject or condemn the revolt of a people that has been suffering under military occupation for 45 years against occupation force," said General Shlomo Gazit, former chief of Israeli military intelligence, in 1993. The real grievance of the EU and US against Hamas is that it refused to accept the capitulation of the Oslo Accords, and has rejected every subsequent effort, from Taba to Geneva, to pass off their calamities on the Palestinians. The west's priority ever since was to break this resistance. Cutting off funding to the Palestinian Authority is an obvious weapon with which to bludgeon Hamas into submission. Boosting the presidential powers of Abbas – as publicly picked for his post by Washington, as was Karzai in Kabul – at the expense of the legislative council is another.

No serious efforts were made to negotiate with the elected Palestinian leadership. I doubt if Hamas could have been rapidly suborned to western and Israeli interests, but it would not have been unprecedented. Hamas' programmatic heritage remains mortgaged to the most fatal weakness of Palestinian nationalism: the belief that the political choices before it are either rejection of the existence of Israel altogether or acceptance of the dismembered remnants of a fifth of the country. From the fantasy maximalism of the first to the pathetic minimalism of the second, the path is all too short, as the history of Fatah has shown.

The test for Hamas is not whether it can be house-trained to the satisfaction of western opinion, but whether it can break with this crippling tradition. Soon after the Hamas election victory in Gaza, I was asked in public by a Palestinian what I would do in their place. "Dissolve the Palestinian Authority" was my response and end the make-believe. To do so would situate the Palestinian national cause on its proper basis, with the demand that the country and its resources be divided equitably, in proportion to two populations that are equal in size - not 80% to one and 20% to the other, a dispossession of such iniquity that no self-respecting people will ever submit to it in the long run. The only acceptable alternative is a single state for Jews and Palestinians alike, in which the exactions of Zionism are repaired. There is no other way.

And Israeli citizens might ponder the following words from Shakespeare (in *The Merchant of Venice*), which I have slightly altered:

"I am a Palestinian. Hath not a Palestinian eyes? Hath not a Palestinian hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? Fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as a Jew is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that ... the villainy you teach me, I will execute; and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction."

P.S.

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