By Dr Robert Crowcroft

By far the biggest fiction in international affairs is the alleged centrality of the Israeli-Palestinian problem to achieving 'world peace' (which itself surely rates as the second biggest fraud). There is a widespread assumption in the West that resolving the disputes between the Israeli state and the Palestinian people who live on its border carries great importance. Indeed the peace process is usually seen as a key component – if not the key component – of winning the battle against Islamism by discrediting its narrative. The argument goes that the sight of Muslims being oppressed by non-Muslims (not oppressed per se, you will note) deeply antagonises the Islamic world; Muslims feel the need to take up arms, not only against Israel but the rest of us too. British government documentation appears to buy in to this. 'The pursuit of a final settlement to the Arab-Israeli conflict remains a top priority for the Foreign Secretary and the Government', David Miliband stated when at the FCO. And of course we are all familiar with the vision for 'two states, living side by side in peace and security'. Thus, peace between Israel and the Palestinians will allegedly give a huge boost to stability across the Middle East; Muslims around the world will be less sympathetic to 'extremism'; and we will all be on the road to peace.

That is the theory at least. If we were to subscribe to it, the failure of the Israelis to compromise more with the Palestinians, or of the Palestinian leaders to renounce violence, would take on the appearance of a Wagnerian tragedy. But in fact this interpretation of the peace process is garbage. To be swept along with it is to display the usual failing of political analysts: to take too seriously what people profess to believe, to be taken in by their rhetoric, and to overlook the reality of what is going on. Rather than a Wagnerian tragedy, what we have in the peace process is a very sophisticated and elaborate fiction – in which all participants engage for their own ends. Some are motivated by power-political ambitions, for which the language of peace provides a useful fig leaf; others get involved out of sheer gesture. But verbal exhortations should not be impede our understanding of what is happening.

Let's start with the rival Palestinian leadership factions, Hamas and Fatah. The last thing that either of them would benefit from is real peace. If peace were to be achieved, the Palestinian territories could become a functioning state(s). And to put it mildly, that would be very bad for their interests. Both groups would gradually lose their current stranglehold over the people of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. After all, if there is no longer an enemy to fight, where is the need for warriors? Moreover – and crucially – Hamas and Fatah are gangster-type organisations. Hamas-controlled Gaza, particularly, is effectively a huge protection racket of the kind common to Africa. Hamas gunmen patrol the streets, stopping cars at random, searching them, and taking for themselves anything they like the look of. Corruption is rampant. The smuggling tunnels that run under the border into Egypt, and from which Hamas take a healthy cut, bring in goods at vastly inflated prices (they have recently been expanded to bring in cars). Al Capone would blush at this. So it must be said that the current siege of Gaza is simply wonderful for Hamas. Why on Earth would they want to end it? The stand off with Israel is the

only way to perpetuate their ascendancy. After all, the whole rationale for the existence of Hamas and Fatah is 'resistance to the Jews'. Without that ritualistic claim to legitimise their own behaviour, they will go out of business (literally). Hamas fires rockets across the border to depict themselves as the defenders of the Palestinian people; this is attractive and brings in new recruits, youths with nothing better to do. But it is increasingly half-hearted.

Thus, the real prize is securing power among the Palestinians. Peace and harmony are distinctly secondary on this agenda. Remember that Yasser Arafat turned down a supposed solution to the territorial issue in 2000, when it was on the table. He had spent far too much time investing in his own brand to see the stock crash. And one suspects the Israelis knew this, and simply wanted to discredit Arafat once and for all – which they did. If we turn to the north, and cross into Lebanon, home of Hezbollah, what do we find? Hezbollah need to make similar claims but, again, the motivation for doing so is fairly conventional – their bid to carve out a mini-state in southern Lebanon. What has Hezbollah done to follow up its supposed success against Israel in the 2006 war? Very little; because their ambitions lie elsewhere, in the realm of Lebanese politics. This should hardly surprise us. Anyway Hezbollah certainly underestimated the ferocity of the Israeli response in 2006 and got much more than they bargained for. In the 2008-9 Gaza War, Hezbollah called on other Arab states to join the fight against Israel – but then itself stood back and did nothing to help Hamas! Fatah, Hamas, and Hezbollah are no match for Israel, and this is not going to change. But each has a vested interest in preserving the status quo of perpetual crisis. It is perfectly tolerable for them. The Palestinian leaders, for instance, have power, prestige, and do not bear the odium of failing to improve living standards for their people, because the whole issue can be blamed on the Israelis. It is difficult not to chuckle at such wonderful cynicism and the gullibility of those who fall for it.

Elsewhere, the rest of the Arab world similarly engages in the Israeli-Palestinian issue only in so far as it provides a useful propaganda exercise. The most obvious is the opportunity to divert the Islamist problem at home to an outlet abroad. Rhetorically signalling interest in the plight of the Palestinians is a means for an Arab leader to demonstrate his bona fides. Thus the Israeli issue can be used as a domestic safety valve. Anything, it would seem, is better than directly confronting the problems of authoritarian, intolerant, and violent societies. And in foreign affairs, the beastliness of the Israelis provides a convenient factor for the Arab states to cite as an obstacle to positive action by themselves on other issues ('We would like to get to grips with our domestic fanatics; but while the Jews are killing our brothers, we can't). Virtually every Islamic state has used the Israel issue as a reason for not taking decisive action against international terrorism – but alternative excuses can, and will, be found if the Palestinian problem was to be suddenly settled. The language is that of rank hypocrisy.

Arab leaders repeatedly point to the Palestinian camps, or Abu Ghraib; and they remember the Crusades vividly. Yet in making these protests about the wickedness of the West, they conveniently overlook the fact that, to put it mildly, they do not have the best of records when it comes to human rights, and Arab jails are based on torture. There is no judgement from Arab states about the legitimacy, or otherwise, of 'oppression'; in other words, it is valid, only they don't like it being carried out by outsiders. Religion and authoritarianism are widely employed by Middle Eastern rulers for their own ends: to discourage rebellion in the name of community unity, or umma; justify the need to safeguard that community against internal and external

threats; undermine political liberalisation; and justify repression. Being seen to be a good Muslim is thus a powerful tool for a ruler in this warlord-dominated region. It helps to consolidate their own position. Gestures, exhortations, and demonstrations of virtue become necessary in order to demonstrate it. Gesturing about the 'Crusaders', or waging war against unpopular internal minorities and external enemies are some of the most common methods of doing so. Western policymakers should be deeply sceptical about investing this rhetoric with any seriousness.

Anyway, Palestinians are widely disliked and distrusted by other Arabs. The PLO tried to take over Jordan in the late 1960s, sparking an internal war in 1970. Neighbouring states are not exactly lining up with offers for their brother Muslims to leave the oppressed territories and come and live with them. Meanwhile Jordan and Syria make historic claims to Palestinian territory as being part of a 'Greater Jordan' or 'Greater Syria', and there are Palestinians sympathetic to such claims. If Palestine was to become a state, its independence would be swiftly menaced by its neighbours. The Syrians, for instance, have demonstrated over many decades that they are happy to engage in such behaviour in trying to control Lebanon. The concern professed by neighbouring states is not, therefore, because the Israeli-Palestinian morass constitutes some kind of unique geopolitical crisis, but instead for conventional and transparent reasons: territorial aggrandisement. Equally, it is well known that for many years Osama bin Laden and the al-Qaeda leadership showed little interest in the plight of the Palestinians. Given the prominence of the problem, that is a striking fact. Nor is it accidental. Most of the al-Qaeda leadership are socially distinguished by background, drawn from the upper levels of (usually) Saudi Arabian or Egyptian society. In the eyes of these groups, the Palestinians tend to be social riff-raff, Bedouins – with dangerously enlightened ideas about women. Their contempt borders on racism. How much effort has al-Qaeda ever put in to engaging Israel? None. What does that tell us? It indicates that, like the Arab states, al-Qaeda's 'interest' in the issue is a gesture, a means to signal worthiness, but that is all – and they certainly do not consider it a geopolitical crisis worth getting involved in.

Robert Crowcroft is a specialist on British politics and defence