By Dr Robert Crowcroft

If the priorities of the leaders of Palestine – at first sight the victims of the crisis – and other Arabs are gesture and power-politics rather than peace, where does that leave the priorities of everyone else? Israel's adherence to the peace process and the 'need' to solve the issue is very similar: an elaborate fiction. Why does the problem of the Palestinians need to be solved so desperately? It doesn't. And Israel knows it. Rockets fired into Israel are certainly annoying, and demand retaliation. But, as described in Part I, the rockets are largely a gesture by Hamas, all part of the image of resisting the ghastly Zionists; the reality is that the terrorist threat on Israel's border is easily containable with occasional military incursions.

The 2008-9 Gaza War was an example of this. The purpose of Operation Cast Lead, begun on 27 December 2008, was not to destroy Hamas – that would take too long and necessitate occupying Gaza – but to demonstrate very clearly that even limited terrorist attacks on Israel would provoke huge retaliation. The campaign was a highly punitive one. Tel Aviv had been planning the war for months, preparing assiduously, giving no indication of this to Hamas, and then launched a devastating surprise attack. In the first four minutes of the war, around a hundred pre-planned targets, including Hamas networks and Gaza's infrastructure, were struck from the air. The same punitive policy can be detected in the earlier 2006 conflict with Hezbollah. It is true that the Israelis consider that war to be a defeat. But bear in mind that the Israelis also think that any war that doesn't result in a smashing defeat of the enemy akin to the 1967 Six Day War is a disaster. Around 700 Hezbollah fighters were killed because they were stupid enough to stand and fight; the terrorists haven't been back for a second round.

And if and when they do, Israel will simply repeat the operation and degrade them again. To be sure, the Israelis went much further than the initial aim of destroying Hezbollah's rockets; but that too was a gesture, demonstrating to a domestic audience that the government was doing something. And the war pushed the Lebanese army into play, which, although Hezbollah might be able to match them, has certainly restricted the terrorist group's room for manoeuvre.

Perpetual low-level violence is thus perfectly tolerable for Israel, particularly when set against the nation's genuine struggle for independence and survival in the wars from 1948 to 1973. The problem is cyclical – weak enemies fire missiles; the Israelis go in; come out; and it all happens again a few years later. Vacuums like the Palestinian territories or Lebanon have to be addressed from time to time. But do these things even matter at the level of grand strategy?

From the Israeli perspective, then, this is the stuff of classic limited war, and periodic, deliberate punishment. Indeed, we might say that punishment is Israel's grand strategy. This is exactly what Israel has done in placing the Gaza strip under economic, political, and military siege. In 2006 the Israeli Air Force pulverised Lebanese targets. How many regional players will want to see that destruction rained down on their towns and cities? For the Israelis, the objective is not

solving the problem for all time – which they recognise can't be done – but merely winning the latest round of conflict, preparing for the next, and weakening the enemy. The point to grasp is that the Israelis just do not care about the Arabs, anymore than the Arabs care about the Israelis. Thus Tel Aviv could be seen as operating a quintessential 'mad dog' foreign policy to deter its enemies. A purposely disproportionate response, like in 2006 and 2008-9, might well be a workable policy in an intractable situation. The Israelis are quite content to use violence as a tool of statecraft. And, if the purpose is enhancing Israel's position relative to its enemies, it has worked very well.

The security fence, meanwhile, largely stopped Palestinian suicide bombing. Racial profiling is conducted unapologetically at airports. Israel has conducted a campaign of assassination with considerable effectiveness – shootings, airstrikes, and outright murder. In particular, the targeting of mid-level militants during the second Intifada proved absolutely integral to degrading militant capabilities. Those in the middle ranks of terrorist groups are the ones with the skills of the insurgent, honed over many years in a dangerous profession where survival is difficult. Targeting them was a masterstroke, dealing Palestinian militants a series of blows from which they have still not recovered. And so, yet again, the 'crisis' of the Middle East in fact resembles a carefully-managed charade created to obscure different, and perhaps less heroic, objectives. The Western intelligentsia might wish that there was a 'better' way. But there probably isn't.

From Israel's perspective, then, the peace process is unnecessary. The Jewish state has been secure since the Egyptians finally abandoned their pretensions to dominance in the Levant in the 1970s; Israel has been the big local power ever since, and no competitors are likely to emerge. Only Egypt and Turkey are even capable of taking on Israel, and neither of them has the slightest interest in doing so. Egypt saw itself as the principal Arab state, destined to be the dominant power of the Muslim world; and kept getting a bloody nose from Israel for its troubles. Having been taught a lesson by the oldest educator of them all – the clenched fist – eventually Cairo gave up the ghost. And the last thing the Turks really want is to get dragged back in to Arab politics. The Arabs are, after all, a traditional nuisance to the Turks; and so Ankara uses Israel to protect its southern flank and keep the Arab states there in line. Don't expect the May 2010 flotilla raid to change this in the slightest. Israel is no threat to Egypt or Turkey, and so confrontation is unlikely. But even if regional politics in the Levant were to spiral into conflict once again, the solution will be a thoroughly conventional one of deterrence and possibly interstate war. What is there in it for Israel to start appeasing the unappeasable refugees on its border?

Anyway, to be blunt, the Israelis could still be solving the Palestinian problem regardless – one new Jewish settlement at a time. Every time another area of Palestinian land is seized and concreted over, life becomes more cramped and intolerable for the Palestinians. But power-politics is a brutal game and always has been. 'The strong do what they can, and the weak suffer what they must', as Thucydides put it. By carving out more territory for themselves, the Israelis are indicating that they recognise the matter is simply intractable. The Palestinians will not be reconciled or bought off; the problem is that two sets of people want the same patch of land. The long-term reality is that the Palestinians will probably leave, in dribs and drabs, as many of them already have. Thus, Tel Aviv adeptly contains the whole issue and weathers the

international condemnation (still more insincere gestures, by the way). Few states are as resolutely unwilling to yield to bullying as Israel. One suspects that the reason Israel is so unpopular is that it is perhaps the only Western country that is unapologetic about acting in its national interests.

Beyond the regional players, the outside world professes a keen interest in peacemaking between Israel and the Palestinians. The reader will, by now, not be surprised to learn that this too is a fiction. For the United States of America, it is true that the fact Islamic states can point to Israel as an excuse for inaction on Islamism is frustrating; but ultimately the US appears to recognise the 'significance' invested in the problem is merely symbolic. If resolving the issue really is the key to achieving US foreign policy, are we really to believe that Washington would not make more determined efforts? No 'Israel lobby' conceivably wields anything like that degree of power. George W. Bush recognised the intractability of the Palestinian problem with Texan clarity, which is one reason why the Left despise him so much – his lack of interest in paying lip service to their nonsense. The Obama administration has been heavily critical of Israel in terms of its rhetoric – a rather pointless bid to appease Arab opinion – but little else. In essence the United States calls for talks, draws up plans, and hosts meetings because it is what a good world power should be seen to do; and there would be great personal credit to be had, if one could be personally seen as having brokered a peace deal (which Bill Clinton, with an eye on his legacy, came to recognise). But all of this is gesture, another state engaging in the fictions surrounding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

So the US turns up because it has to, and exploits the issue to be seen as morally worthy. Much the same could be said of others, like the Europeans. For them criticising Israel is also a way to score easy points with disaffected Muslim minorities. But never forget the European tradition of pontificating on Middle Eastern affairs. After all, while Israel is now a whipping boy, in the seventies it was the Left's favourite poster boy, the heroic underdog standing up to the backwards Arabs. Fashions change, but the European propensity for gesture politics does not. Russia, meanwhile, acts as a member of the Quartet not because Moscow has deep national interests in the issue, but because being treated by other nations as prestigious is rather enjoyable; and there are obvious advantages to being seen as a friend of the Arab peoples.

In conclusion, then, since the end of the Cold War the Palestinian territories have basically constituted a 'failed state'. The struggle with Israel is in fact a very common one throughout the world: displaced peoples, disputed territory, and mutual hatred. When two groups of people want the same patch of land, the stronger one will win. But this common phenomenon has occurred in a context where the future of the Palestinians is bizarrely claimed to be of immense importance to world peace, and the level of energy devoted to it totally in excess of its real significance (contrast this with similar challenges in, say East Timor, Chechnya, Cyprus, or virtually anywhere else for that matter; none of these issues garner anything like the same volume of publicity, but there is no self-evident reason why Israel and Palestine should be any more important to 'world peace' than those listed above). Thus, it must be doubted whether the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians really is a crisis; given the true nature of the agendas displayed by the players in this game, it probably is not. Israel manages it with ruthless effectiveness, and the 'crisis' has been tremendously beneficial to all contenders for Palestinian leadership; indeed they would be a busted flush without it. So the pretence is maintained

because it is a mutually agreeable fiction. The lesson, then, is that a 'crisis' may not be a real crisis, but merely a means of exhortation, where symbolic gestures can serve a purpose. Western policymakers and the shapers of public opinion should wake up.

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