

GAZA: THE DEVILS SOLUTION

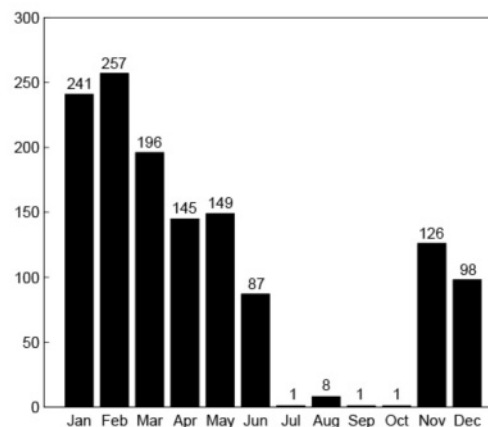


Gaza is no longer the world's biggest prison camp, it is a duck shoot. If you would prefer not to hide behind euphemisms, it is a death camp; where people who cannot leave face daily bombardment and where even 'safe havens' have become military targets. The response of the international community has been lamentable, hand-wringing and tokenistic. There will be no international war crimes tribunal into the slaughter over 1,000 civilians, the injuring of 5,000 more, and the creation of 50,000 homeless people. Israel will ignore any such calls, the US would veto them and so (probably) would the UK.

Behind the macabre slaughter that is taking place, perhaps the greatest obscenity is the redefining of history as it is being written. This has nothing to do with Israeli security or its right to defend itself.

Israel has tired of having Palestinians as third-class inhabitants within its land. The onslaught runs alongside the banning of the two Arab parties (Balad and the United Arab List) from the forthcoming Israeli elections. It is the first stage of a process that defines Palestinians as non-citizens and is a precursor to their removal.

Contrary to the claims of George Bush, Tony Blair and UK Ministers, this also has very little to do with the 'impossibility' of dealing with an intransigent Hamas. In his statement to the House of Commons 12th January 2008, the Foreign Secretary said: "The Gaza truce of June to December 2008 was less than a ceasefire. Over 300 rockets were fired into Israel... the immediate trigger for Israeli military action on 27 December was the end of the truce." This isn't quite what the figures show. Turn the clock back to the start of the ceasefire in June 2008. For four consecutive months, the level of rocket and mortar fire dropped to almost zero.



The figures are from a fact sheet produced by the Israeli consulate in New York. They confirm that Hamas, (not Iran or Syria), has been able to deliver a ceasefire and maintain it. It did so in the face of an

ongoing siege of Gaza that the UN has described as “intolerable, appalling and tragic.” For the record, it is also important to note that the ceasefire was ended by Israel and not Hamas. On November 4th 2008, Israeli troops killed a Palestinian. The event was followed by a volley of mortars fired from Gaza. This, in turn, provoked an Israeli air strike killing a further 6 Palestinians. Normal hostilities were thus resumed.

The Huffington Post news website in the USA offered an even bleaker analysis of ‘conflict pauses’ in Gaza. I’ll let the figures speak for themselves: 79% of all pauses ended when Israel killed a Palestinian. Only 8% were ended by a Palestinian attack. The rest saw both sides break the pause on the same day. Despite this, we have a peace envoy who continues to act as the mouthpiece for the Bush/Israeli military machine, insisting that it is the Palestinian victims who are to blame. Blair has apparently pocketed £15m since ceasing to be Bush’s representative in Britain. Perhaps he should just take his own peace dividend and peace off.

The disparity in casualty figures paints its own alternative picture to whose security is most at risk. In less than one month, Israel will have killed more Palestinian civilians than the number of Israelis killed by terrorism in over two decades. In the last two weeks the Israeli army has killed more of its own soldiers than the total number of Israeli citizens killed by Palestinians in the last 2 years. But even the death figures don’t begin to measure the degradation.

The unilateral Israeli withdrawal from Gaza in August 2005 was hailed as a great peace gesture. There was little mention of the fact that although 8,000 settlers withdrew from Gaza (destroying the houses and farms they left behind), some 12,000 Israelis then settled on the West Bank in contravention of international law. It is hard to put land-grabbing into the pot of peace-making without poisoning the whole meal. This, however, is what has been happening for decades.

It is 15 years since I visited Gaza and the Israeli Occupied Territories and have just re-read the pamphlet I wrote afterwards, ‘Unholy Acts in Holy Places’. It makes depressing reading. These were the last days of the Washington peace process; days when the Israeli security services were supporting Hamas in order to undermine the PLO. Negotiations were going nowhere and each time the PLO came back from Washington there were fresh atrocities for them to address.

Cynical cruelty confronted us wherever we went. Whole streets were like open dolls houses. Israeli tanks had rolled in. A megaphone announcement told people they had 20 minutes to leave. The tanks then blasted away the front of people’s houses and left. Afterwards families returned to live their lives in open view of the road; floors propped up with acro-props, meals cooked on calor gas stoves.

“That’s the problem,” said our PLO host. “It’s what we come back to every time. And you know who provides the acro-props and stoves? Hamas.

If we can’t come back with more than dotted ‘i’s and crossed ‘t’s the people will walk away from us and turn to Hamas.” And so it is.

The trouble with the current bombardment of Gaza is that Israel wants far more than the destruction of the tunnels and far more than a ceasefire. It wants regime change to begin with and it wants to squash the basis of any Palestinian movement that would be able to press for the removal of the land-grab wall, the return to pre-1967 boundaries and an inclusion of Jerusalem in any long-term peace settlement. Israeli politics has moved too far to the right to even countenance this.

The war on Gaza is rescuing the Israeli government's electoral prospects. The right may yet survive a challenge from the ultra-right. The militarisation of the political mindset in Israel has all but crushed the standing of the Israeli left and peace movement. Close friends from the Jewish socialist and Jewish peace movement no longer go back to Israel. Many have said that it is not the fear of Hamas that dictates this, but the fact of being seen as the enemy within amongst their own community.

I can see no end to the militarisation of the peace process in Israel. To some extent, the US and the UK underpin this. US military aid to Israel has spiralled. Since 1987 it averaged \$1.8bn a year. The Clinton administration increased this to a final figure of \$2.4bn and, in 2007, Bush increased this to an average of \$3bn a year for the following decade. As it stands, every Israeli citizen receives \$411 a year in military aid from the US. Compare this to Sierra Leone's per capita GDP of \$290 a year. It makes a mockery of aid programmes.

Britain's connection is on a smaller, but no less significant scale. The UK has consistently sold arms to Israel. Over recent years, the value of such arms exports has risen from £10m to £25m per year. In the first half of 2008 alone though, this figure had reached £24m. The critical question facing the UK is whether the bombardment of Gaza would ever reach a point where arms exports are unilaterally suspended until the collective punishment ceases?

It is the militarisation of Israeli thinking that now presents the greatest threat to Israeli security. The bombardment will drive Palestinians towards Hamas and not away from them. It will draw in Iran and Syria rather than create a free-standing Palestinian voice. Crushing the resistance would not be enough for the new Israeli right. Land-grabbing would not be reversed. Pre-1967 contours would be crudely dismissed. A shared Jerusalem would not even be on the agenda. It is self-deluding to believe that a peace is possible within such constraints.

In 1993, one of our Palestinian hosts explained simply why they could wait for a solution that included Jerusalem, but not live with one that didn't. "Take my house," he said, "take my belongings, take my clothes, take my life... they are all without meaning without the restoration of East Jerusalem." Nothing from today's agenda points remotely in this direction. The alternative may be seen most clearly in the plans of the religious right. If living and sharing with Palestinians is out of the question then better to face the reality of living without them. Whether by diaspora, destitution or death, this appears to be the answer to 'the Palestinian problem'. If it is a solution then it is closer to the Devil's solution, the Final Solution.