

Lessons from the War in Gaza

What a tragedy. It could have been so different. It all began with the forced removals. In August 2005 Israel removed the entire Jewish population from Gaza against its will, forcibly uprooting 21 Jewish towns, with about 9000 people ? a painful and costly exercise requiring 45 000 Israeli soldiers and policemen. 38 synagogues were dismantled, cemeteries were moved, about 5000 children relocated, and flourishing agricultural enterprises abandoned.

Israel did so to accede to Palestinian demands for Gaza to become Jew-free ? with an independent Palestinian government that would ultimately lead to Palestinian statehood. August 2005, was a crucial turning point. A choice lay before the 1.3 million Palestinian people living in Gaza. They could use the freedom of the Israeli withdrawal to take their destiny into their own hands by building a peaceful, successful and prosperous society on land with more per capita space than in Hong Kong and Singapore. They could have constructed a vibrant, thriving society with great schools, hospitals and all the infrastructure necessary to improve their lives for generations to come.

August 2005 was a moment of opportunity. But it was also a moment of clarity about the demands for Palestinian independence. At the time in August 2005 Daniel Pipes wrote: ?Are Israel's critics correct? Does the ?occupation? of the West Bank and Gaza cause the Palestinian Arabs' anti-Semitism, their suicide factories, and their terrorism? And is it true these horrors will end only when Israeli civilians and troops leave the territories? The answer is coming soon ? If Israel's critics are right, the Gaza withdrawal will improve Palestinian attitudes toward Israel, leading to an end of incitement and a steep drop in attempted violence, followed by a renewal of negotiations and a full settlement. Logic requires, after all, that if ?occupation? is the problem, ending it, even partially, will lead to a solution.?

At this critical cross-roads in history, instead of choosing a path of life, peace and prosperity, the people of Gaza chose the path of death and war of Hamas, thereby subjecting themselves to deprivation and misery. In parliamentary elections in January 2006, the people of Gaza democratically elected Hamas by a large majority. Hamas has always rejected the two state solution and has sought the complete destruction of the Jewish state, and indeed, even the murder of all Jews around the world, as it openly sets out in its founding constitution. Hamas, one of the main architects and implementers of suicide bombing campaign against Israeli civilians, is aligned with the forces of global terrorism, who bring mayhem and death across the world from Bali and New York, to London and Mumbai.

The people of Gaza, under their duly elected Hamas government went to war against the people and government of Israel. Since 2005, more that 6500 rockets have been fired from Gaza into Israel, with more than 3 200 in 2008. Gaza became an Iranian satellite as it began a dramatic military build up, establishing an army of 20 000 men trained and equipped by Iran, with Iranian missiles, which gave the Gaza government the capability of striking deep into Israeli territory, bringing into its range 1 million citizens. Hamas stated openly their intention to expand their range of weaponry to ultimately include Tel Aviv and Ben Gurion International airport.

What does a government do when its citizens and country are threatened in such a way? The town and cities in southern Israel are traumatised by this threat. In the worst affected areas normal life has all but come to a halt with schools and businesses unable to function, as people have to stay at all times within seconds of a bomb shelter. Many are fleeing their homes and taking refuge further north. After patiently enduring more than three years of rocket fire and as a last resort, Israel launched a war of self-defence to protect its citizens. What else can it do? It has targeted military installations and personnel only. It has used precise and sophisticated equipment to pin-point these targets in order to minimize civilian casualties. This has been difficult because Hamas places its military personnel and equipment in heavily populated civilian areas, deliberately using them as human shields.

Forced into war, Israel has conducted itself in a manner which has no precedent in human history. Israel has provided humanitarian aid, medical treatment and basic services to the people of Gaza and has distributed more than 800 000 leaflets urging civilians living in targeted areas to evacuate. It even sent out mass sms's to people living in areas about to be bombed. Has there ever been any army in the world that has sacrificed the element of surprise thereby jeopardising its military success in order to protect enemy

civilian? As a result the number of civilian casualties is proportionately lower than any other conflict. With its fire power Israel, if it were bombing indiscriminately as its critics claim, it would have inflicted tens of thousands of fatalities. Any death is a tragedy and the human suffering involved in this war is a source of agony for all of us.

Hamas is guilty of at least 3 war crimes as defined in international law: It specifically targets enemy civilians, it uses its own civilians as human shields and seeks the destruction of a member state of the United Nations. Israel does everything it can to minimize civilian casualties. Hamas does everything in its power to maximize civilian casualties. To equate these two different approaches is misguided, and worse, it is immoral. Hamas, with well-known its ideology of suicide, death, and martyrdom is part of the world-wide alliance of terrorist forces, that have attacked innocent civilians in cities across the globe. Israel is part of the world-wide alliance for freedom, democracy and the sanctity of life, and is on the front lines of this global conflict.

Let us pray for one another. Let Jews pray for Muslims and let Muslims pray for Jews, and may our Father in Heaven look down in mercy on us all and help us to bring to an end this terrible human suffering, so that the vision of the prophet Isaiah can be fulfilled:
?Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.?

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