

# Without a Vision for Peace, Violence Fills the Vacuum in Israel-Palestine Conflict

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Those who do not sleep at night are seldom in a state of mind for peacemaking. The stories they tell one another frequently have little sense of a future, and are more often about the violence done to them or done by them to others. Traumatized communities have little empathy for the experience of ‘the other’, as there is often a deep existential anxiety about their own survival, and in these conditions it is difficult to think about the future.

How evident this is in the latest round of fighting between Gaza and Israel – what a senseless level of human sacrifice with more than 1,060 Palestinians

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and 46 Israelis dead. This as a lose-lose war that will only serves to harden attitudes and make the end of conflict even more difficult to resolve. The leadership of Hamas and the Israeli government cannot fail to appreciate that once the rocket launchings and air strikes cease, they will have very little to show for all this human and material sacrifice. Once war begins neither side will seek compromise until they can tell their own people that they are winning.

What we are seeing is an asymmetrical struggle between Hamas and Israel. In Israel the population has been subjected to an endless barrage of rockets, sirens and air raid shelters, but with an Iron Dome to protect them. No citizen could tolerate this and not wish their government to step in to protect them.

But the latest round of fighting does little to increase Israel's security. In Gaza the conditions are so dire that Hamas' organization has nothing to lose in this fight, and the desperate population has no Iron Dome to protect them. But how did we get to this latest futile cycle of violence?

Part of the crisis in Gaza came about because the new Egyptian government under President Sisi declared the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organisation, and did not wish to support its sister organisation Hamas in Gaza. The Egyptian government closed the smuggling tunnels that were an essential part of the Gazan economy and its tax revenues. Israel tightened its economic blockade last October when it discovered that the concrete to build homes was being used for a network of what Israel called 'terror tunnels'. This crippled the construction industry in Gaza which in turn affected the employment of 30,000 construction workers.

The Egyptian government's blockade on Gaza tunnels linking the Gaza with the Sinai peninsular had been the main cause of financial crisis in Gaza, and 45,000 Hamas government employers police, teachers and other public

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employers remained unpaid for five months. Catalyzed by unmet salary obligations in Gaza, Hamas and Fatah announced the Unity government, which was sworn in on June 2.

This reconciliation between the two Palestinian political parties seemed more of a tactical marriage of convenience than any strategic vision of how to work together. Hamas had thought that the unity agreement would result in the Hamas civil servants in Gaza being paid. The Palestinian authority withheld payments as a result of pressure from Israel and the US both of whom have classified Hamas as a terrorist organization. The consequence of this left the anomaly of Hamas workers unpaid whilst those on the Fatah payroll continued to receive their salaries. Qatar was prepared to step in to provide £20 million for Hamas but was unable to place the money in a Gazan bank. The UN Middle East envoy Robert Serry sought to arrange the transfer of this money to Hamas in Gaza, via Abbas's PA, but he was rebuffed. He then asked Israel to facilitate the transfer, but was again rejected.

Finally, the UN offered to take the money from Qatar into Gaza. The Israeli foreign minister Avigdor Lieberman considered Serry's actions an effort to legitimize Hamas and therefore objected. So a number of parties seem to have been complicit in the failure of the politics to prevent this latest round of deadly fighting in Gaza.

Lacking any kind of vision to work with the Palestinian Unity government, Prime Minister Netanyahu tried to leverage as much pressure as he could on Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to end the reconciliation. The Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas had pledged that the new government would follow his commitment to nonviolence and continue in peaceful negotiations.

The situation was further fuelled by the tragic kidnapping of 3 Israeli teenagers. The Israeli government immediately blamed Hamas, although evidence suggests that the Israeli government would have known from their intelligence that this kidnapping was perpetrated by a rogue criminal family called the Qawasmeh clan, who has a history of acting independently with acts of violence especially whenever Hamas has negotiated ceasefires. The Israeli government, however, took the opportunity of an operation against the Hamas infrastructure in the West Bank which arrested 530 Palestinians, many of them members of Hamas, on the pretext of searching for the kidnapped teenagers.

As emotions sweep through this conflict, citizens turn to more extreme groups to represent them. Children in Gaza have now lost parents, brothers and sisters, and this latest round of fighting has produced many candidates willing to join more hard-line Salafi groups with their nihilistic agendas. In such a climate, the motivation can be to damage one's enemy rather than to protect one's own best interest.

### **What about the international community?**

The war would not be a futile exercise if the international community did not turn its back once fighting dies down, but addressed some of the root causes of this very deepseated conflict. Gaza is a very small, overcrowded piece of land with a population of 1.8 million people. Could there be a policy to “kill Gaza with kindness” in which resources were pumped in to support this troubled community?

In Israel, imagination has been demonstrated in some quarters. Shaul Mofaz a former defence minister of Israel suggested a plan in which the international community would oversee the demilitarization of the Gaza Strip. In return, Arab

countries and the international community would provide the Palestinian Authority with fifty billion dollars to rehabilitate refugee camps and build the Gaza Strip. Qatar has talked about building a commercial port on the Gaza strip: major money would need to be invested in schools and homes, and to rehabilitate the refugee camps. The people need to feel protected and to have something to invest in and much to lose by war. Minds need to be focused.

President Abbas has sent a letter to Ban Ki Moon calling for international protection in Gaza and for the West Bank to promote political, social and economic rights. If this scheme were realized, Israel would be protected from Hamas; and Gazan Palestinians would be protected from Israel. All Gaza's crossings with Egypt and Israel would need be opened and placed under international monitoring forces to enable the flow of goods but prevent the rockets going through the tunnels and the use of materials for military purposes.

## **Hamas inside the tent**

Of course none of this would have any traction without a changed relationship with Hamas. It would be a pipe dream to expect that Hamas would go along with demilitarization and putting weapons beyond use, without the prospect of being part of any future engagement. In the end it would be better to have Hamas inside the tent of any potential agreement than acting as spoilers on the outside. Peacemaking does not just involve talking to men in grey suits or people who think like us, but it ultimately involves bringing in some of the more extreme groups around the table. Israel's political culture is not one that talks the language of diplomacy but has a mindset focused on defence and security. The Israeli government has pursued a policy of conflict management with the

illusionary aim of keeping quiet without addressing the troubled relationship with its neighbour.

Now this latest round of fighting has created the conditions to incubate more radical groups and make peace making even more elusive. Tragically every Gazan life that is lost hardens hearts against Israel and creates more enemies for tomorrow. The current events have demonstrated that without an active vision for peace-making, a terrible vacuum is created where endless cycles of war become the only hopeless option available. This is not how ordinary citizens sleep at night, they need hope for the future.

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