

OPINION: GAZA AND THE CURSE OF HALF-FINISHED WARS

Amir Taheri « Asharq al awsat » Friday, 25 Jul, 2014

It took the United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon two weeks to come out with a call for a ceasefire in Gaza. A diplomatic gesture of the lowest order, the Secretary-General's meek move reflected the unwillingness, not to say inability, of the international community to address the real causes of the bloody conflict. Of all the issues that divide the international community, the so-called Israel–Palestine conflict is the most charged with emotions, and thus least suitable for clinical analysis. And, yet, without such analysis one cannot hope that a ceasefire would provide anything more than a lull for belligerents to prepare for the next round.

Why did the war break out at this time?

War always breaks out when one or more parties in an adversarial relationship find the status quo intolerable. In the case of Gaza, Hamas was the first to find the status quo, established after Israeli disengagement in 2005, no longer bearable. Several events led to this.

-First, the collapse of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt deprived Hamas, a branch of the pan-Islamist movement, not only of an ally but also of a hinterland that had remained open even under ousted president Hosni Mubarak.

-Next, Iran's growing economic problems meant a reduction in Tehran's support for Hamas.

-Finally, Hamas's failure to revive the economy, combined with its authoritarian methods, meant a loss of popular support.

To change the status quo, Hamas had to re-heat the cold dish of rocket attacks on Israel. By doing so it could claim it was "*resisting the Zionist enemy*," and thus merited greater support from Islamic nations. It could also silence critics within the Palestinian community, including those in Gaza. More importantly, Hamas hoped to seek the lion's share in the putative "national government" agreed with Fatah. What Hamas leaders ignored was the fact that Israel, feeling the status quo was untenable, would seize the opportunity to attempt changing it. The holding of free elections and the creation of a government of national unity could strengthen the Palestinian position in any "final settlement" talks with Israel. The moribund "two-state" formula could be revived with support from Washington and Arab states.

In politics if you can't say in a single sentence what your goal is you had better keep quiet until you can do so.

What is Hamas's goal, in one sentence? That is not hard to find out. For it is stated in the movement's charter: the destruction of Israel. To be sure, the

world is full of messianic, millenarian and other utopian movements dedicated to idealistic agendas, and there is no reason why Hamas should not be one of them. Hamas lives in a fantasy world. It has forgotten that its constituency—the people of Gaza—are mostly refugees, and more attached to Palestine, and not necessarily any Islamist dream. If Hamas won support among them it was because it fought for their plight, not for a pan-Islamist agenda. On the other hand, the fact that the Palestinian Authority had little to show for 20 years of peace talks also strengthened Hamas.

Israel's goal, in the context of the status quo in Gaza, is to stop rocket attacks on its territory. Theoretically, Israel has the resources to attain that goal. It could reoccupy Gaza, dismantle rocket sites, destroy Hamas's command and control network, release Hamas's jailed opponents and capture or kill Hamas cadres. Such a scenario is more difficult to enact than 30 years ago when Israel changed an unfavorable status quo in Lebanon through war.

We live in a world in which war is seldom allowed to perform its full function, which is to dismantle the status quo and build a new one. Because the international mood is hostile to war, it is difficult to suggest that war has always been, and is likely to remain, an instrument of regulating conflictual relations among peoples. One cannot argue that, like a surgical operation to remove cancer, war is sometimes necessary as a last resort.

The Gaza war is likely to prove to have been futile. Israeli and international public opinion, US pressure, and the rising cost of modern warfare might not allow Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to make full use of war as an instrument of reshaping geopolitical realities. Worse still, instead of chasing Hamas out of Gaza, Netanyahu may end up by helping Hamas return to the West Bank. For its part, Hamas is too weak to reshape the status quo in its interest. Once the guns have fallen silent we shall be back where we were in the first place, with the added consequences of a half-finished war.

Israel is a cause—Zionism—that found its expression in a state. Hamas, however, is a messianic movement whose aim is the destruction of Israel rather than the creation of a Palestinian state. The two adversaries can't understand each other's grammar. Since 1948 we have witnessed the rise and fall of 17 Palestinian "liberation" movements. With one exception, all were nationalist groups in the same mold as national liberation outfits after the Second World War. Again, with one exception, even with Marxist, Stalinist or Maoist labels, all those groups included the word "Palestine" in their identification.

The sole exception is Hamas. Seeing itself as part of a global, thus stateless, pan-Islamist movement, it represents a negative energy that undermines the hopes of Palestinians for a state of their own.

The Gaza tragedy should remind us of one fact: If there is anything worse than war, it is a half-finished war.

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Ses écrits se concentrent sur les affaires du Moyen-Orient et des sujets liés au terrorisme islamiste. Il est chroniqueur pour de nombreux journaux : Asharq Al-Aws