

GAZA, 2014: UNDERSTANDING THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT

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With more than 500 hundred civilian casualties and over 80 thousands refugees displaced across 61 different shelter camps, this new round of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has taken the world of international affairs by storm. Once again, just a few years after we have witnessed the astonishing phenomenon of the so called “Arab Spring”, we look at the Middle East with uncertainty and concern, silenced in our attempt to explain yet another bloodshed and unable to make any prediction about what will be next in Gaza.

Since mid-June 2014, the world media are providing detailed coverage of the events in the Gaza strip and the numerous social networks are flooded with images and opinions. The kidnapping and killing of three young Israeli students in the West Bank has indeed set in motion a series of events culminated in the umpteenth conflict between the Netanyahu government and Hamas, of which, as it always happen, the Palestinian population is paying the highest price. Tel Aviv was very quick in attributing the responsibility of the killing of its three youngsters to Hamas, the government in Gaza since the elections in 2006, and its response is as brutal as it could be expected. Operation “Protective Edge”, arguably the deadliest military operation since 2008, was launched by the Israeli government on July 8, and it is the result of the escalation between the two factions that followed Israel’s fierce quest to find the abductors and

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murderers of his three students. After the rounding up of hundreds of Palestinians, allegedly affiliated to Hamas, carried out by the Israeli government in mid-June with the operation “Brother’s Keepers”, the hostilities between the two factions have tragically renewed: Hamas fires rockets against Israel, Israel fires against Gaza, and both factions cause the death of hundreds of undefended Palestinians civilians in a vicious circle of escalating violence.

In this rather dark scenario, one would have to look at the regional framework to fully understand the implications of this conflict. As Sayeh Hassan rightfully comments on the Canadian newspaper *The Star*², many have disregarded Hamas’s affiliation to Iran, onto which Hamas’s military capability depends. It was with the \$300 million per year destined by the Iranian government to Hamas’s pockets that the rockets against Israel were manufactured, transferred and eventually fired, with grave consequences for the Palestinians in Gaza, as today’s events show. The relations between Tehran and Hamas have suffered a setback when Hamas moved out of Damascus during the Syrian war, but now have resumed in light of the renewed hatred for their common enemy, Israel. Thus, although Tehran knows better than starting a nuclear war with Netanyahu, it does not restrain from fighting a proxy war counting on organisations such as Hamas, Hezbollah and other Islamic jihadist groups.

And so, as we approach the end of the first month of military confrontation, we are still struggling to imagine an end to this seemingly interminable conflict, born out of historical divergences and still unable to find answers in or outside the Middle Eastern borders.

Indeed, sadly, the chances of a successful third party mediation still appear remote. Despite the involvement of numerous organisations and countries in the effort to terminate the conflict, neither Hamas nor Netanyahu have yet interrupted the hostilities.

The government in Cairo, led by President Abdel Fatah al-Sisi after the events of the Arab Spring a couple of years ago, seem to have lost credibility in the eyes of Hamas’s leaders. After the military coup that has brought him to power, al-Sisi has not limited his means to persecute the members of the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas’s ideological partner in Egypt, and to stiffen his attitude towards the leaders in Gaza.

² Sayeh Hassan, ‘Iran’s fingerprints all over Hamas-Israel conflict’, *The Star*, July 21, 2014.

Despite its key role in the region and the successful mediation operated by Cairo in occasion of the previous Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Egypt appears now unable to exercise a positive role in bringing the two factions to a life-saving cease-fire. Indeed, Hamas's leaders have rejected Cairo's proposal to end the military confrontation adjudging they have not been previously consulted, and during the six hours of quiet from the Israeli side, several rockets have been fired from Gaza.

Tony Blair, official envoy of the 'Quartet on the Middle East', a foursome group established in Madrid in 2002 with the goal of mediating between Israelis and Palestinians, seems unable to do better. Palestinian representatives have strongly criticised his work, which appears to be limited to that old rhetoric unable to lead towards some sort of agreement: "Always the statement of the Quartet really means nothing because it was always full of what they call constructive ambiguity that really took us to nowhere"³, commented back in 2012 Mohammed Shtayyeh, an aide to the Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, and since then, not much as improved. On the contrary, Blair's attempt to establish a tripartite mediation over the conflict – the Quartet, al-Sisi and Israel – has further fuelled Hamas's hostility, quite literally cut out of the negotiations. It is thus unsurprisingly that Israel's interruption of the bombing was unilateral. Hamas, at least formally, demands the lifting of Israel's eight-year blockade on the Gaza Strip, the opening of the Rafah border crossing with Egypt and the release of several Palestinian prisoners arrested during operation "Brother's Keepers", and hardly will interrupt the launch of its rockets before these conditions are met.

The United Nations is also struggling to placate the factions. Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon has urged the Israeli government to "exercise maximum restraint" and to stop the bombing of Gaza, condemning the "atrocious action"⁴ of a government whose reprisal policy is costing hundreds of lives. Yet, without the strong support of the United States, the UN has little chance to exercise any influence on Tel Aviv.

It is indeed Washington's position to strike me as highly controversial, to say the least. On what is almost a unilateral violence (20 Israeli casualties against the over 500 on the Palestinian side), the White House appears rather blindly supportive of Israel's actions and, despite some generic words about the urgency to reach a cease-fire, it looks like Tel Aviv will not suffer a setback on its relations with the United States. On a recent

³ Matthew Kalman, 'Useless, useless, useless': the Palestinian verdict on Tony Blair's job, *The Independent*, December 16, 2012.

⁴ 'UN Security Council to hold emergency meeting on Gaza', *RTE News*, July 21, 2014.

interview for *Fox News* dated July 21, Secretary of State John Kerry has commented: "You have a right to go in and take out those tunnels... We completely support that. And we support Israel's right to defend itself against rockets that are continuing to come in."⁵ Just a couple of days before, on July 19, President Obama crafted similar remarks: the United States respects Israel's right to self-defence and invites it to respond to Hamas's rockets "in a way that minimises civilian casualties."⁶

Apart from the debatable notion of 'minimising civilian casualties', the key point that emerges from the above declarations is Israel's 'right to self-defence', for it brings us back to several decades ago, when Israel's founding father David Ben Gurion was facing the Arab nationalists led by Egyptian President Gamal A. Nasser in a game of retaliatory raids and arms race.

When in 1955 President Eisenhower withdrew the economic help promised to Egypt in light of some Cold War considerations, the Cairo government turned to the Soviet Union, signing an arm deal with Czechoslovakia aimed to enhance its military capability to face Israel. Since then, Israeli policy-makers have worked unrelentingly to improve their military capability with Washington's help, appealing to Israel's "... right to existence"⁷ as the main reason why the United States should provide military help to Israel. This request, or necessity, derives from what is known as *bitahon*, which is the survival and security of Israel, an objective to which all the political efforts and the entire foreign policy had to aim to, and that continues to this day.

After the creation of Israel, the main threat to the Jewish people's survival arose from the Arab world. Because of the Arabs' hostility, Ben Gurion realised that only by enhancing Israel's military position in the Middle East, Tel Aviv could move the Arabs to acknowledge the very existence of the Jewish nation and therefore begin any negotiation for peace.⁸ From this considerations, Ben Gurion followed a foreign policy based on two

⁵ Ibidem.

⁶ Jack Simpson, 'Israel-Gaza conflict: Barack Obama warns Benjamin Netanyahu against escalating civilian deaths in Gaza', *The Independent*, July 19, 2014

⁷ FRUS, 1958-1960, Vol. XIII, *Arab-Israeli Dispute; United Arab Republic; North Africa*, 131

⁸ Avraham Avi-hai, *Ben Gurion State-BUILDER: Principles and Pragmatism 1948-1963*, (New York, Toronto, Jerusalem: Israel Universities Press, 1947), 40-42. The history of Israel's relation with Washington is indeed marked by the numerous requests advanced by the Israeli government for military aid to enhance Israel's security. In 1962 for instance, the Kennedy administration agreed to sell the HAWK missile system to Israel officially ending the policy of embargo on Israel that had characterised the US attitude until that moment. From that moment on, Washington has not questioned again whether it should sell weapons to Israel. Significantly, documents relative to the sale not only reveal that Israel's foreign policy was based around the so-called "active defence", a strategy according to which Israel's would remind the Arabs of its military superiority by conducting pre-emptive attacks. Research Memorandum, RNA-26, May 23, 1962.

main sub-objectives. First of all, he believed it was important to orient Israel towards America: in fact, after the collapse of the European superpowers following the Second World War, US and USSR emerged as the two poles, and if the Soviet way was excluded because of the extremism of the Communist regime (Ben Gurion aligned Stalin's communism to Hitler's national-socialism and Mussolini's fascism) and because of Stalin's alleged anti-Semitism⁹, the United States, already home of many Jews, became the perfect ally for Israel. Secondly, Israel had to achieve military supremacy, in both arms and technology. Again, an orientation towards America was inevitable because of its "... technological sophistication"¹⁰: if Israel wanted not only to be able to defend itself but also to stand out of the Middle East on a military level, it needed American to be the supplier of such armaments.

Today, not only has Israel reached that level of military supremacy in the Middle East, but its alliance with the United States has long been achieved. It is however Washington's short-sighted tolerance of Israel's actions the base of the frightening understanding between these two governments, and the main reason why we struggle to understand Kerr and Obama's recent declaration. Surely, much has happened since the creation of Israel, but a glance at these sixty-nine years of violent history will unquestionably prove that the issue of Palestine is the base of the disagreements between Arabs and Israelis, and that Washington's lack of leverage has contributed to the failure of the many attempts that have been made in this direction. Unfortunately, until something on the Palestinian question will be achieved, there will not be many chances of stopping this bloodshed. Thus, for the time being, the umpteenth conflict between Arabs and Israelis appears to be without solution, and even though we do

JFK Library, Box 407, Robert Komer, Arab Israeli Dispute. Documents also reveal that the United States was the main recipient of Israel's requests. The Kennedy administration tried to convince the Israeli government to acquire missiles from Britain, specifically the Bloodhound, but Golda Meir replied firmly: "Israel has no interest in the Bloodhound". FRUS, 1961-1963, *Near East*, Vol. XVIII, 1962-1963, 30. Such exchange reveals that in order to enhance its own military apparatus Israel would rely on the world superpower.

⁹ Enquiries on Stalin's alleged anti-Semitism began after the purge of the Jewish anti-fascist committee, right during the conclusion of the war. Gennady Kostyrchenko, in light of the disclosure of secret documents, explains how the creation of the JAC and Stalin's support for the creation of Israel was derived from strictly political calculation, and the repression of the Russian Jews began right after Stalin had exploited the political convenience in supporting the Jewish people. Марк ДЕЙЧ, *Как убивали Михоэлса*, Moskovskij Komsomolets, 2005. Besides the feeling of "... revulsion and disgust..." for the Jews, Stalin was also afraid that the emancipation of the Jewish people in Israel would create a subversive feeling against the regime among the Russian Jews. Orlando Fingés, *The Whisperers: Private Life in Stalin's Russia*, (London, New York: Penguin Group, 2007), 493.

¹⁰Avraham Avi-hai, *Ben Gurion State-BUILDER...*,41.

advocate a quick ending, we should probably acknowledge that it will not be achieved much more than a temporary suspension of these seventy year-long hostilities.

However, as today we have access to resources unavailable some decades ago, we should work towards two circumstances to occur.

The first, and most important one, is that the United States would take off the traditional blindfold it seems to be wearing every time Israel is involved in a controversy and start acting as the international superpower that it is. Israel claims to have the right to exist, but it is denying the Palestinians of their right to exist, by controlling their airspace and waters, their commerce activities, the population registry and the Palestinians' movements in and out of Gaza, as well as electricity supplies and other inputs.¹¹ Israel claims to be defending itself, but it is harming the defenceless Palestinian people by indiscriminately firing hundreds of rockets against Gaza. Israel claims to be ensuring its own survival, but is putting an abrupt end to hundreds of Palestinian lives. Washington can no longer tolerate such actions. The US government has shown in the past that it can oppose to Israel and exercise enough leverage to restrain Tel Aviv from its retaliatory policies – to go back to the Eisenhower era, one can think of the American intervention during the Suez crisis of 1956 – and it should probably use its alliance with Israel to gain some influence with the Netanyahu government. Hardly would the Israeli government risk to jeopardise its relationship with Washington, for it now Israel is “... one of the most feared and despised countries in the world”¹², and it needs the American support to avoid being left with no supporters in the international arena. If, as Netanyahu claims, Israel is defending itself against the actions of terrorist groups and well-known regional actors, it should work to define its targets and stop this abrupt killing of innocent people. But if the Obama administration does not intervene in this direction, the conflict is likely to continue for some time, in exactly the same, tragic way.

Secondly, the international community should work in cooperation with other international bodies to sponsor programs of assistance to the Palestinian people and to exercise enough pressure on the parties involved to work towards some sort of disengagement. Today's events are proving that a soft-handed approach no longer offers

¹¹ “Scale of Control: Israel's Continued Responsibility in the Gaza Strip”, *Gisha*, November 2011. <http://gisha.org/publication/1660> accessed (24.09.2014)

¹² “A Hideous Atrocity”: Noam Chomsky on Israel's Assault on Gaza & U.S. Support for the Occupation”, *Democracy Now*, August 7, 2014. http://www.democracynow.org/2014/8/7/a_hideous_atrocity_noam_chomsky_on, accessed (13.08.2014).

any solution, and that the Palestinian question can no longer be left unanswered. It is time to address this issue and find a definitive solution that could finally put an end to these tragic events.