

Eyeless in Gaza

Uri Avnery

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THE TROUBLE WITH war is that it has two sides. Everything would be so much easier if war had only one side. Ours, of course.

There you are, drawing up a wonderful plan for the next war, preparing it, training for it, until everything is perfect.

And then the war starts, and to your utmost surprise it appears that there is another side, too, which also has a wonderful plan, and has prepared it and trained for it.

When the two plans meet, everything goes wrong. Both plans break down. You don't know what's going to happen. How to go on. You do things you have not planned for. And when you have had enough of it and want to get out, you don't know how. It's so much more difficult to end a war than to start a war, especially when both sides need to declare victory.

That's where we are now.

HOW DID it all start? Depends where you want to begin.

Like everywhere else, every event in Gaza is a reaction to another event. You do something because the other side did something. Which they did because you did something. One can unravel this until the beginning of history. Or at least until Samson the Hero.

Samson, it will be remembered, was captured by the Philistines, blinded and brought to Gaza. There he committed suicide by bringing the temple down on himself and all the leaders and people, crying out: "Let my soul die with the Philistines!" (Judges 16:30)

If that's too remote, let's start with the beginning of the present occupation, 1967.

(There was a forgotten occupation before that. When Israel conquered the Gaza Strip and all of Sinai in the course of the 1956 Suez war, David Ben-Gurion declared the founding of the "Third Israeli Kingdom", only to announce in a broken voice, a few dates later, that he had promised President Dwight Eisenhower to withdraw from the entire Sinai Peninsula. Some Israeli parties urged him to keep at least the Gaza Strip, but he refused. He did not want to have hundreds of thousands more Arabs in Israel.)

A friend of mine reminded me of an article I had written less than two years after the Six Day War, during which we occupied Gaza again. I had just found out that two Arab

road-construction workers, one from the West Bank and one from the Gaza Strip, doing exactly the same job, were paid different wages. The Gaza man was paid much less.

Being a member of the Knesset, I made inquiries. A high-level official explained to me that this was a matter of policy. The purpose was to cause the Arabs to leave Gaza and settle in the West Bank (or elsewhere), in order to disperse the 400 thousand Arabs then living in the Strip, mostly refugees from Israel. Obviously this did not go so very well—now there are about 1.80 million there.

Then, in February 1969, I warned: "(If we go on) we shall be faced with a terrible choice—to suffer from a wave of terrorism that will cover the entire country, or to engage in acts of revenge and oppression so brutal that they will corrupt our souls and cause the whole world to condemn us."

I mention this not (only) to blow my own horn, but to show that any reasonable person could have foreseen what was going to happen.

IT TOOK a long time for Gaza to reach this point.

I remember an evening in Gaza in the mid-90s. I had been invited to a Palestinian conference (about prisoners), which lasted several days, and my hosts invited me to stay with Rachel in a hotel on the sea-shore. Gaza was then a nice place. In the late evening we took a stroll along the central boulevard. We had pleasant chats with people who recognized us as Israelis. We were happy.

I also remember the day when the Israeli army withdrew from most of the Strip. Near Gaza city there stood a huge Israeli watchtower, many floors high, "so that the Israeli soldiers could look into every window in Gaza". When the soldiers left, I climbed to the top, passing hundreds of happy boys who were going up and down like the angels on the ladder in Jacob's dream in the Bible. Again we were happy. They are probably Hamas members now.

That was the time when Yasser Arafat, son of a Gaza Strip family, returned to Palestine and set up his HQ in Gaza. A beautiful new airport was built. Plans for a large new sea-port were circulating.

(A big Dutch harbor-building corporation approached me discreetly and asked me to use my friendly relations with Arafat to obtain the job for them. They hinted at a very large gratuity. I politely refused. During all the years

I knew Arafat, I never asked him for a favor. I think that this was the basis of our rather strange friendship.)

If the port had been built, Gaza would have become a flourishing commercial hub. The standard of living would have risen steeply, the inclination of the people to vote for a radical Islamic party would have declined.

WHY DID this not happen? Israel refused to allow the port to be built. Contrary to a specific undertaking in the 1993 Oslo agreement, Israel cut off all passages between the Strip and the West Bank. The aim was to prevent any possibility of a viable Palestinian state being set up.

True, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon evacuated the more than a dozen settlements along the Gaza shore. Today, one of our rightist slogans is “We evacuated the entire Gaza Strip and what did we get in return? Qassam rockets!” Ergo: we can't give up the West Bank.

But Sharon did not turn the Strip over to the Palestinian Authority. Israelis are obsessed with the idea of doing things “unilaterally”. The army withdrew, the Strip was left in chaos, without a government, without any agreement between the two sides.

Gaza sank into misery. In the 2006 Palestinian elections, under the supervision of ex-President Jimmy Carter, the people of Gaza—like the people of the West Bank—gave a relative majority to the Hamas party. When Hamas was denied power, it took the Gaza Strip by force, with the population applauding.

The Israeli government reacted by imposing a blockade. Only limited quantities of goods approved by the occupation authorities were let in. An American senator raised hell when he found out that pasta was considered a security risk and not allowed in. Practically nothing was let out, which is incomprehensible from the “security” point of view of weapons “smuggling” but clear from the point of view of “strangling”. Unemployment reached almost 60%.

The Strip is roughly 40 km long and 10 km wide. In the north and the east it borders Israel, in the west it borders the sea, which is controlled by the Israeli navy. In the south it borders Egypt, which is now ruled by a brutal anti-Islamic dictatorship, allied with Israel. As the slogan goes, it is “the world's largest open-air prison”.

BOTH SIDES now proclaim that their aim is to put an end to this situation. But they mean two very different things.

The Israeli side wants the blockade to remain in force, though in a more liberal form. Pasta and much more will be let into the Strip, but under strict supervision. No airport. No sea-port. Hamas must be prevented from re-arming.

The Palestinian side wants the blockade to be removed once and for all, even officially. They want their port and airport. They don't mind supervision, either international

or by the Palestinian Unity Government under Mahmoud Abbas.

How to square this circle, especially when the “mediator” is the Egyptian dictator, who acts practically as an agent of Israel? It is a mark of the situation that the US has disappeared as a mediator. After the futile John Kerry peace mediation efforts it is now generally despised throughout the Middle East.

Israel cannot “destroy” Hamas, as our semi-fascist politicians (in the government, too) loudly demand. Nor do they really want to. If Hamas is “destroyed”, Gaza would have to be turned over to the Palestinian Authority (viz. Fatah). That would mean the re-unification of the West Bank and Gaza, after all the long-lasting and successful Israeli efforts to divide them. No good.

If Hamas remains, Israel cannot allow the “terror-organization” to prosper. Relaxation of the blockade will only be limited, if that. The population will embrace Hamas even more, dreaming of revenge for the terrible devastation caused by Israel during this war. The next war will be just around the corner—as almost all Israelis believe anyhow.

In the end, we shall be where we were before.

THERE CAN be no real solution for Gaza without a real solution for Palestine.

The blockade must end, with serious security concerns of both sides properly addressed.

The Gaza Strip and the West Bank (with East Jerusalem) must be reunited.

The four “safe passages” between the two territories, promised in the Oslo agreement, must at last be opened.

There must be Palestinian elections, long overdue, for the presidency and the parliament, with a new government accepted by all Palestinian factions and recognized by the world community, including Israel and the USA.

Serious peace negotiations, based on the two-state solution, must start and be concluded within a reasonable time.

Hamas must formally undertake to accept the peace agreement reached by these negotiations.

Israel's legitimate security concerns must be addressed.

The Gaza port must be opened and enable the Strip and the entire State of Palestine to import and export goods.

There is no sense in trying to “solve” one of these problems separately. They must be solved together. They can be solved together.

Unless we want to go around and around, from one “round” to the next, without hope and redemption.

“We”—Israelis and Palestinians, locked for ever in an embrace of war.

Or do what Samson did: commit suicide.