

From the ashes of Gaza

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THE assault on Gaza, planned over six months and executed with perfect timing, was designed largely to help the incumbent parties triumph in the forthcoming Israeli elections. The dead Palestinians are little more than election fodder in a cynical contest between the right and the far right in Israel. Washington and its EU allies, perfectly aware that Gaza was about to be assaulted, sit back and watch.

Washington blames the pro-Hamas Palestinians, with Obama and Bush singing from the same AIPAC hymn sheet. The EU politicians, having observed the collective punishment inflicted on Gaza, the targeting of civilians were convinced that it was the rocket attacks that had "provoked" Israel but called on both sides to end the violence, with nil effect.

The moth-eaten Mubarak dictatorship in Egypt and Nato's favourite Islamists in Ankara failed to register even a symbolic protest by recalling their ambassadors from

Israel. China and Russia did not convene a meeting of the UN Security Council to discuss the crisis.

One outcome of this latest attack will be to inflame Muslim communities throughout the world and swell the ranks of those very organisations that the west claims it is

and EU funds channelled into the Fatah campaign, and US congressmen announcing that Hamas should not be allowed to run.

Even the election timing was set to rig the outcome. Scheduled for the summer of 2005, it was delayed till January 2006 to give Abbas time to distribute assets in Gaza -- in the words of an Egyptian intelligence officer, "the public will then support the Authority against Hamas."

Popular desire for a clean broom after ten years of corruption, bullying and bluster under Fatah proved stronger than all of this. Rulers and journalists across the Atlantic world treated Hamas's electoral triumph as an ominous sign of rising fundamentalism, and a fearsome blow to the prospects of peace with Israel.

Immediate financial and diplomatic pressures were applied to force Hamas to adopt the same policies as those of the party it had defeated at the polls.

Uncompromised by the Palestinian Authority's combination of greed and dependency, the self-enrichment of its servile spokesmen and policemen, and their acquiescence in a "peace process,"

Hamas offered the alternative of a simple example. Without any of the resources of its rival, it set up clinics, schools, hospitals, vocational training and welfare programs for the poor. Its leaders and cadres lived frugally, within reach of ordinary people.

It is this response to everyday needs that

has won Hamas the broad base of its support, not daily recitation of verses from the Koran. How far its conduct in the second Intifada has given it an additional degree of credibility is less clear. Its armed attacks on Israel have been retaliations against an occupation deadlier than any actions it has ever undertaken.

Measured on the scale of IDF killings, Palestinian strikes have been few and far between. The asymmetry was exposed during Hamas's unilateral ceasefire in June 2003, despite the Israeli campaign of mass arrests that followed, where some 300 Hamas cadres were seized from the West Bank.

On August 19, 2003, a self-proclaimed "Hamas" cell from Hebron, disowned by the official leadership, blew up a bus in west Jerusalem, upon which Israel promptly assassinated the Hamas ceasefire's negotiator, Ismail Abu Shanab. Hamas, in turn, responded. In return, the Palestinian Authority and Arab states cut funding to its charities and, in September 2003, the EU declared the whole Hamas movement to be a terrorist organisation -- a longstanding demand of Tel Aviv.

What has actually distinguished Hamas in a hopelessly unequal combat is not dispatch of suicide bombers but its superior discipline -- demonstrated by its ability to enforce a self-declared ceasefire against Israel over the past year.

All civilian deaths are to be condemned,

but since Israel is their principal practitioner, Euro-American cant serves only to expose those who utter it.

The boot of murder is on the other foot, ruthlessly stamped into Palestine by a modern army equipped with jets, tanks and missiles in the longest-armed oppression of modern history.

"Nobody can reject or condemn the revolt of a people that has been suffering under military occupation for 45 years against occupation force," said General Shlomo Gazit, former chief of Israeli military intelligence, in 1993. The real grievance of the EU and US against Hamas is that it refused to accept the capitulation of the Oslo Accords, and has rejected every subsequent effort, from Taba to Geneva, to pass off their calamities on the Palestinians.

The West's priority ever since was to break this resistance. Cutting off funding to the Palestinian Authority is an obvious weapon with which to bludgeon Hamas into submission. Boosting the presidential powers of Abbas at the expense of the legislative council is another.

No serious efforts were made to negotiate with the elected Palestinian leadership. I doubt if Hamas could have been rapidly suborned to western and Israeli interests, but it would not have been unprecedented. Hamas' programmatic heritage remains mortgaged to the most fatal weakness of Palestinian nationalism: the belief that the

political choices before it are either rejection of the existence of Israel altogether or acceptance of the dismembered remnants of a fifth of the country.

From the fantasy maximalism of the first to the pathetic minimalism of the second, the path is all too short, as the history of Fatah has shown.

The test for Hamas is not whether it can be house-trained to the satisfaction of western opinion, but whether it can break with this crippling tradition. Soon after the Hamas election victory in Gaza, I was asked in public by a Palestinian what I would do in their place. "Dissolve the Palestinian Authority" was my response and end the make-believe.

To do so would situate the Palestinian national cause on its proper basis, with the demand that the country and its resources be divided equitably, in proportion to two populations that are equal in size -- not 80% to one and 20% to the other, a dispossession of such iniquity that no self-respecting people will ever submit to it in the long run.

The only acceptable alternative is a single state for Jews and Palestinians alike, in which the exactions of Zionism are repaid. There is no other way.

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