

Israel and Gaza: We're waiting, Mr Obama

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In recent weeks we have witnessed the violent reality of what is now a war: Israel's war against Gaza. Experts in both camps will scramble to prove that responsibility for breaking the cease-fire lies with 'the enemy'. Here, however, I intend neither to go review history, nor to apportion blame. Instead, I will outline four points which I think are essential to a better understanding of the mechanisms that have driven the two sides to reopen hostilities.

1. As we know, Hamas has once again started firing hundreds of rockets into southern Israel. Plainly, the two year-old blockade of Gaza has not weakened its ability to rocket the civilian population of that region. But one thing is new: over time, the range of these home-made weapons has increased, and it will not be long before they can reach the centres of towns such as Ashdod, Ashkelon and Beersheba, creating dozens or even hundreds of Israeli casualties. From one period of violence to the next, Hamas grows stronger, and its grip on Gaza Strip tightens. Do the Israeli authorities really think that they will succeed in 'eradicating' it by bombing hundreds of sites and by launching a major ground offensive whose end or final destination no-one can predict?

2. The government of a democratic state is behaving exactly like a 'terrorist' organisation (a label that fits Hamas, but only in part). Fully aware that there will be widespread 'collateral' damage, that democratic government is targeting overpopulated areas with its planes and missiles. If the life of innocent civilians were not at stake, the 'regrets' expressed by the key Israeli spokespersons might make us laugh. The asymmetry between the two 'organisations' - the military superiority of a sophisticated army against the home-made rockets of an armed group - should not make us forget that each organisation is using the same methods.

3. What are the declared objectives of this war? In the ranks of the Israeli authorities, especially the military ones, confusion seems to reign. Some leaders justify the war on the grounds of their determination to protect the population of southern Israel by terminating the hail of rockets. But we know that, in the past, such objectives have never been achieved other than through cease-fire agreements, however limited in scope.

Others speak of 'eradicating' Hamas by eliminating its key political and military leaders. Has experience not yet taught them that the death of one such leader spawns ten new ones, each determined to continue the struggle? So how can we explain the fact that the overwhelming majority of the Israeli public has again supported their authorities' decision to launch this massive offensive against Hamas in Gaza?

4. What are the objectives that the Israeli authorities have been pursuing for decades? While consistently stating their aspirations for peace with their neighbours and with the Arab world - consistently calling for the recognition of the State of Israel, and consistently stating their desire to integrate into the region - their actual response or action towards their neighbours

has, in almost all cases, been one of brute force. How can we explain that the Peace Initiative promulgated by the Arab League was ignored by the Israeli government after its unanimous ratification by the member states in March 2002? And that the Initiative received the same treatment after its revival in 2007?

Should we once again be reminded that this historic document proposes to the State of Israel that the conflict be ended, relations with all Arab states be normalised, and diplomatic and commercial relations be opened? Should we be reminded that the document also demands Israel's withdrawal from the territories it has occupied since 4 June 1967 (with minor exchanges of territories to allow Israel to keep blocks of colonies in which tens of thousands of Israelis now live); that East Jerusalem should become the capital of the Palestinian State; and that an 'agreed' - thus negotiated - solution should be found to the problem of Palestinian refugees?

Rather than resorting once more to a military option from which no solution can flow, surely the moment has come to take the only option that might bring life, future and hope to the whole region?

It is useless to count on Israeli politicians, none of whom seem to have either the necessary stature nor the ability to think of anything but their own political futures. During these years of 'negotiations' - which have brought no improvement to the lives of the Palestinians of the West Bank and East Jerusalem - the leaders of the Palestinian authority have been marginalised. Then, after the coup by Hamas in June 2007, they lost all control of the Gaza Strip.

The European Union has proved that it has nothing to offer but money to rebuild what the Israeli army has destroyed and to pay the salaries of Palestinian civil servants. To crown it all, last month it accepted unconditionally that Israel's status should be upgraded.

The eyes and hopes of all those who aspire to a just and lasting peace in the region are now turned on the new US administration. Will Barack Obama, the new President, who promised to bring change - who symbolises change - have the vision and courage he needs to force the main protagonists in this conflict to negotiate definitive peace agreements?

Is he fully convinced that peace between Israel and the Arabs will help him embark on withdrawals from Iraq, investing more efforts in Afghanistan and in Pakistan and much-needed talks with Iran? If so, this portfolio should be his foreign-policy priority from the very start of his mandate.

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