

Demonising Israel fuels the war in Gaza



by Simon Belt

Whilst the open-ended ceasefire between Israel and Hamas in Gaza holds after months of Israeli bombing, the media spotlight has refocussed on the UK's terror threat level being raised from 'substantial' to 'severe', supposedly in response to recent activities in Iraq and Syria. The focus on activities in the Middle East through the summer has perhaps made for the least silly season for news I've known. That might sound trite given the horrors of war, but just just because it's usually off the front page doesn't mean to say it's not happening or that it's not better to cover, so don't be quite so quick with your comeback.

In many ways, with Israel falling off the front pages, in favour of the devastation in Syria, potential break-up of Iraq and fragmentation in the Ukraine, it is perhaps a good time to look at the summer campaigns against Israel in a more measured way. The bombing of Gaza and military incursions by Israel to destroy Hamas tunnels were ostensibly prompted by a resurgence of Hamas rockets being fired into Israel, and happened with a backdrop of gains by Islamist forces in the region. Israel's sophisticated Iron Dome system, financially supported by

the US, has proved adept at being able to intercept most of what is thrown at it, but notwithstanding that, citizens of Israel are regularly mobilised to take shelter in case any rockets get through.

The Israeli defenses and highly militarised society are familiar with being threatened and attacked from a variety of neighbours throughout its history. Indeed, the very creation of Israel in 1948 as an externally imposed creation by western powers, most notably the US, was always going to embed disputes over its existence and legitimacy from others in the region. Its historic role symbolised the transfer of power as world policeman from Britain to the US in the immediate post Second World War re-arrangement of world affairs. Britain was eased out of its position as pre-eminent colonial power in Palestine, and across the Middle East and Asia, to be superseded by the US, the real victors of World War 2 - goodbye the League of Nations and hello the United Nations.

The real tragedy was that those Jewish people, who dispersed from Central Europe to avoid the pogroms and subsequent Holocaust, and Britain and America didn't want to accept in large numbers, became the mechanism through which the re-arrangement of global powers in the Middle East could be achieved. Israel was created by the implementation of a United Nations 'Partition Plan for Palestine' recommendation, in opposition to Britain's plans before the war, and a Jewish state was imposed on the region with complete disregard for the wishes or interest of Arab nationalists of the time. The role of Israel as America and the West's anchor in the Middle East meant that its existence was challenged by anti-imperialists in the West, often taking the form of radicals in the West supporting the right of Palestinians to self determination - really a one state solution for Jews and Arabs in Palestine.

So have we been witnessing a simple continuation of Israel acting as a running dog lackey of capitalist-imperialism as the comfortable posturing of the Cold War left would have it? Well I don't think so. A lot has changed since the end of the Cold War and strident assertions of

national interest is one of the most notable. Most of the time these days, politicians and even corporate interests are keen to assert their lack of purposeful interest. So often these days, power and guidance is handed over to governance committees within corporations or bureaucratic institutions like the European Union or United Nations lest those previously in charge are seen to have a declared intentional approach they'll mobilise around. External consultants are employed to make decisions that politicians don't want to be tarnished with, and the plea of '**something must be done**' is uttered at every opportunity by the very people who should be doing something.

Israel stands out like a sore thumb as a nation with a strident purpose, marking out its territory and defending it against the fallout of failing states around them. And here's the most important point about the failing states issue - it's the failure of the West to have any meaningful purpose in the world that has led it to meddle, posture and interfere persistently in areas like the Middle East to fill the gap presented by the vacuum captured so well with the 'something must be done' iteration. Helping, indeed initiating the destruction of states in Iraq, Libya and Afghanistan to give itself a short term fix and injection of seeming moral purpose as an actor on the world stage, the Western powers of US, UK and France present themselves as purposeful internationally and more importantly at home. The destruction caused leaves a heavy death toll and embeds protracted instability in the region. The come-ons offered by the EU, Nato and 'world leaders' to anyone in places like Syria and Ukraine to have a go at breaking up their own states internally result in a grotesquely purposeless destruction of life and societies.

In the middle of this is the Cold War proxy of the West in the region, Israel, left to take the rap for the West's meddling as no longer a favoured state. Indeed the actions of Israel standing up for itself and asserting its own interests independently is seen as problematic, and at the highest level of the UN. Western powers can bomb away with hugely devastating consequences in Iraq, Libya and Afghanistan, even Pakistan with impunity. However, when it comes to Israel's actions in Gaza there has been an increased shift in the last 20 years to describe Israel as beyond the pale and acting out of control, without restraint, and a particular focus on women and children being killed. In a world that searches for the lost order and storyline of the Cold War, setting Israel up as uniquely evil in the world, and as some would have it, unduly influencing US Congress is an approach that's intellectually lazy and sanitises real power relations.

The dangerous consequences of demonising Israel in the West as a pariah state in a Middle East, itself destabilised by an out of control West looking for a purpose to galvanise itself through, is only going to lead Israel to take more defensive postures as it tries to secure its own future. The recent political and military campaigns seem more aimed at drawing in Western and other forces in to the situation than anything else. Whilst Western and other powers welcome the invitation, the idea that outside forces offer a solution to the problems in the Middle East turns reality on its head. And the guilt trip of 'we caused the problems in these regions so we are obliged to help resolve them' might appear a little more honest in paying lip service to causality, but only serves to minimise that responsibility and whitewash it with yet more of the same.



And so to the street protests in Britain that have been trying to campaign for Israel to be delegitimised and cast outside the grouping of morally worthy states in the world. In Manchester, as in other cities across Britain, campaigners have targetted shops that sell goods from Israel, and seen artistic shows that have some funding from Israel closed down. Laughably, and if only it wasn't true, George Galloway MP declared "We have declared Bradford an Israel-free zone. We don't want any Israeli goods. We don't want any Israeli services. We don't want any Israeli academics coming to the university or college. We don't even want any Israeli tourists to come to Bradford even if any of them had thought of doing so. We reject this illegal, barbarous, savage state that calls itself Israel. And you have to do the same."

There's been a peculiar stand-off on one of Manchester's poshest shopping streets whereby pro-Palestinian campaigners have been trying to close down a shop called Kedem because it sells soap made in Israel. After police decided to keep Jewish groups counter demonstrating outside the shop, apart from the pro-Palestinian demonstrators, they had a rally which Councillor Pat Karney spoke at. He was booed off the microphone for suggesting that the campaigners should consider the impact for low paid shop workers if any of the shops were closed down. There is such a heavy dose of self-righteous rhetoric behind this boycott campaign it makes you wonder who it's really meant to benefit. The aim here, as far as I can see, is for a small group of people to have an insignificant impact on the sales of posh soap, by deciding on behalf of others what's best for them. That comes across as elitist contempt by those who think they know best for others rather than political campaigning to win over hearts and minds of ordinary people to a cause.

The double standards that sanitises the far more destructive role of Western powers like the UK and US in the region is breathtaking for so called radicals to articulate, but to do so alongside their setting up of Israel as focal point for grievances is only going to make things a whole lot worse. There surely is no positive role for Western intervention in the Middle East, and scapegoating Israel in the West will encourage tensions in the region to be heightened and does nothing to challenge a growing anti-semitism in the West.