

Divide and Rule, Israeli-style

Can the Arab world be turned into Gaza's jailers?

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The boycott by Israel and the international community of the Palestinian Authority finally blew up in their faces with Hamas' recent bloody takeover of Gaza. Or so argues Gideon Levy, one of the saner voices still to be found in Israel.

"Starving, drying up and blocking aid do not sear the consciousness and do not weaken political movements. On the contrary ... Reality has refuted the chorus of experts and commentators who preached [on] behalf of the boycott policy. This daft notion that it is possible to topple an elected government by applying pressure on a helpless population suffered a complete failure."

But has Levy got it wrong? The faces of Israeli and American politicians, including Ehud Olmert and George Bush, appear soot-free. On the contrary. Over the past fortnight they have been looking and sounding even more smug than usual.

The problem with Levy's analysis is that it assumes that Israel and the US wanted sanctions to bring about the fall of Hamas, either by giving Fatah the upper hand so that it could deal a knockout blow to the Palestinian government, or by inciting ordinary Palestinians to rise up and demand that their earlier electoral decision be reversed and Fatah reinstalled. In short, Levy, like most observers, assumes that the policy was designed to enforce regime change.

But what if that was not the point of the sanctions? And if so, what goals were Israel and the US pursuing?

The parallels between Iraq and Gaza may be instructive. After all, Iraq is the West's only other recent experiment in imposing sanctions to starve a nation. And we all know where it led: to an even deeper entrenchment of Saddam Hussein's rule.

True, the circumstances in Iraq and Gaza are different: most Iraqis wanted Saddam out but had no way to effect change, while most Gazans wanted Hamas in and made it happen by voting for them in last year's elections. Nevertheless, it may be that the US and Israel drew a different lesson from the sanctions experience in Iraq.

Whether intended or not, sanctions proved a very effective tool for destroying the internal bonds that held Iraqi society together. Destitution and hunger are powerful incentives to turn on one's neighbour as well as one's enemy. A society where resources — food, medicines, water and electricity — are in short supply is also a society where everyone looks out for himself. It is a society that, with a little prompting, can easily be made to tear itself apart.

And that is precisely what the Americans began to engineer after their “shock and awe” invasion of 2003. Contrary to previous US interventions abroad, Saddam was not toppled and replaced with another strongman — one more to the West’s liking. Instead of regime change, we were given regime overthrow. Or as Daniel Pipes, one of the neoconservative ideologues of the attack on Iraq, expressed it, the goal was “limited to destroying tyranny, not sponsoring its replacement ... Fixing Iraq is neither the coalition’s responsibility nor its burden.”

In place of Saddam, the Americans created a safe haven known as the Green Zone from which its occupation regime could loosely police the country and oversee the theft of Iraq’s oil, while also sitting back and watching a sectarian civil war between the Sunni and Shia populations spiral out of control and decimate the Iraqi population.

What did Washington hope to achieve? Pipes offers a clue: “When Sunni terrorists target Shiites and vice-versa, non-Muslims [that is, US occupation forces and their allies] are less likely to be hurt. Civil war in Iraq, in short, would be a humanitarian tragedy but not a strategic one.” In other words, enabling a civil war in Iraq was far preferable to allowing Iraqis to unite and mount an effective resistance to the US occupation. After all, Iraqi deaths — at least 650,000 of them, according to the last realistic count — are as good as worthless, while US soldiers’ lives cost votes back home.

For the neocon cabal behind the Iraq invasion, civil war was seen to have two beneficial outcomes.

First, it eroded the solidarity of ordinary Iraqis, depleting their energies and making them less likely to join or support the resistance to the occupation. The insurgency has remained a terrible irritation to US forces but not the fatal blow it might have been were the Sunni and Shia to fight side by side. As a result, the theft of Iraq’s resources has been made easier.

And second, in the longer term, civil war is making inevitable a slow process of communal partition and ethnic cleansing. Four million Iraqis are reported to have been forced either to leave the country or flee their homes. Iraq is being broken up into small ethnic and religious fiefdoms that will be easier to manage and manipulate.

Is this the model for Gaza now and the West Bank later?

It is worth recalling that neither Israel nor the US pushed for an easing of the sanctions on the Palestinian Authority after the national unity government of Hamas and Fatah was formed earlier this year. In fact, the US and Israel could barely conceal their panic at the development. The moment the Mecca agreement was signed, reports of US efforts to train and arm Fatah forces loyal to President Mahmoud Abbas became a newspaper staple.

The cumulative effect of US support for Fatah, as well as Israel’s continuing arrests of Hamas legislators in the West Bank, was to strain already tense relations between Hamas and Fatah to breaking point. When Hamas learnt that Abbas’ security chief, Mohammed Dahlan, with US encouragement, was preparing to carry out a coup against them in Gaza, they got the first shot in.

Did Fatah really believe it could pull off a coup in Gaza, given the evident weakness of its forces there, or was the rumour little more than American and Israeli spin, designed to undermine Hamas’ faith in Fatah and doom the unity government? Were Abbas and Dahlan

really hoping to topple Hamas, or were they the useful idiots needed by the US and Israel? These are questions that may have to be settled by the historians.

But with the fingerprints of Elliott Abrams, one of the more durable neocons in the Bush administration, to be found all over this episode, we can surmise that what Washington and Israel are intending for the Palestinians will have strong echoes of what has unfolded in Iraq.

By engineering the destruction of the unity government, Israel and the US have ensured that there is no danger of a new Palestinian consensus emerging, one that might have cornered Israel into peace talks. A unity government might have found a formula offering Israel: * limited recognition inside the pre-1967 borders in return for recognition of a Palestinian state and the territorial integrity of the West Bank and Gaza; * a long-term ceasefire in return for Israel ending its campaign of constant violence and violations of Palestinian sovereignty; * and a commitment to honour past agreements in return for Israel's abiding by UN resolutions and accepting a just solution for the Palestinian refugees.

After decades of Israeli bad faith, and the growing rancour between Fatah and Hamas, the chances of them finding common ground on which to make such an offer, it must be admitted, would have been slight. But now they are non-existent.

That is exactly how Israel wants it, because it has no interest in meaningful peace talks with the Palestinians or in a final agreement. It wants only to impose solutions that suit Israel's interests, which are securing the maximum amount of land for an exclusive Jewish state and leaving the Palestinians so weak and divided that they will never be able to mount a serious challenge to Israel's dictates.

Instead, Hamas' dismal authority over the prison camp called Gaza and Fatah's bastard governance of the ghettos called the West Bank offer a model more satisfying for Israel and the US — and one not unlike Iraq. A sort of sheriff's divide and rule in the Wild West.

Just as in Iraq, Israel and the US have made sure that no Palestinian strongman arises to replace Yasser Arafat. Just as in Iraq, they are encouraging civil war as an alternative to resistance to occupation, as Palestine's resources — land, not oil — are stolen. Just as in Iraq, they are causing a permanent and irreversible partition, in this case between the West Bank and Gaza, to create more easily managed territorial ghettos. And just as in Iraq, the likely reaction is an even greater extremism from the Palestinians that will undermine their cause in the eyes of the international community.

Where will this lead the Palestinians next?

Israel is already pulling the strings of Fatah with a new adeptness since the latter's humiliation in Gaza. Abbas is currently basking in Israeli munificence for his rogue West Bank regime, including the decision to release a substantial chunk of the \$700 million tax monies owed to the Palestinians (including those of Gaza, of course) and withheld for years by Israel. The price, according to the Israeli media, was a commitment from Abbas not to contemplate re-entering a unity government with Hamas.

The goal will be to increase the strains between Hamas and Fatah to breaking point in the West Bank, but ensure that Fatah wins the confrontation there. Fatah is already militarily stronger and with generous patronage from Israel and the US — including arms and training, and possibly the return of the Badr Brigade currently holed up in Jordan — it should be able

to rout Hamas. The difference in status between Gaza and the West Bank that has been long desired by Israel will be complete.

The Palestinian people have already been carved up into a multitude of constituencies. There are the Palestinians under occupation, those living as second-class citizens of Israel, those allowed to remain “residents” of Jerusalem, and those dispersed to camps across the Middle East. Even within these groups, there are a host of sub-identities: refugees and non-refugees; refugees included as citizens in their host state and those excluded; occupied Palestinians living under the control of the Palestinian Authority and those under Israel’s military government; and so on.

Now, Israel has entrenched maybe the most significant division of all: the absolute and irreversible separation of Gaza and the West Bank. What applies to one will no longer be true for the other. Each will be a separate case; their fates will no longer be tied. One will be, as Israelis like to call it, Hamastan, and other Fatahland, with separate governments and different treatment from Israel and the international community.

The reasons why Israel prefers this arrangement are manifold.

First, Gaza can now be written off by the international community as a basket case. The Israeli media is currently awash with patronising commentary from the political and security establishments about how to help avoid a humanitarian crisis in Gaza, including the possibility of air drops of aid over the Gaza “security fence” — as though Gaza were Pakistan after an earthquake. From past experience, and the current menacing sounds from Israel’s new Defence Minister, Ehud Barak, those food packages will quickly turn into bombs if Gaza does not keep quiet.

As Israeli and US officials have been phrasing it, there is a new “clarity” in the situation. In a Hamastan, Gaza’s militants and civilians can be targeted by Israel with little discrimination and no outcry from the international community. Israel will hope that message from Gaza will not be lost on West Bank Palestinians as they decide who to give their support to, Fatah or Hamas.

Second, at their meeting last week Olmert and Bush revived talk of Palestinian statehood. According to Olmert, Bush “wants to realize, while he is in office, the dream of creating a Palestinian state”. Both are keen to make quick progress, a sure sign of mischief in the making. Certainly, they know they are now under no pressure to create the single viable Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza once promised by President Bush. An embattled Abbas will not be calling for the inclusion of Gaza in his ghetto-fiefdom.

Third, the separation of Gaza from the West Bank may be used to inject new life into Olmert’s shopworn convergence plan — if he can dress it up new clothes. Convergence, which required a very limited withdrawal from those areas of the West Bank heavily populated with Palestinians while Israel annexed most of its illegal colonies and kept the Jordan Valley, was officially ditched last summer after Israel’s humiliation by Hizbullah.

Why seek to revive convergence? Because it is the key to Israel securing the expanded Jewish fortress state that is its only sure protection from the rapid demographic growth of the Palestinians, soon to outnumber Jews in the Holy Land, and Israel’s fears that it may then be compared to apartheid South Africa.

If the occupation continues unchanged, Israel's security establishment has long been warning, the Palestinians will eventually wake up to the only practical response: to dissolve the Palestinian Authority, Israel's clever ruse to make the Palestinian leadership responsible for suppressing Palestinian resistance to the occupation, thereby forcing Israel to pick up the bill for the occupation rather than Europe. The next stage would be an anti-apartheid struggle for one state in historic Palestine.

For this reason, demographic separation from the Palestinians has been the logic of every major Israeli policy initiative since — and including — Oslo. Convergence requires no loss of Israel's control over Palestinian lives, ensured through the all but finished grid of walls, settlements, bypass roads and checkpoints, only a repackaging of their occupation as statehood.

The biggest objection in Israel to Olmert's plan — as well as to the related Gaza disengagement — was the concern that, once the army had unilaterally withdrawn from the Palestinian ghettos, the Palestinians would be free to launch terror attacks, including sending rockets out of their prisons into Israel. Most Israelis, of course, never consider the role of the occupation in prompting such attacks.

But Olmert may believe he has found a way to silence his domestic critics. For the first time he seems genuinely keen to get his Arab neighbours involved in the establishment of a Palestinian "state". As he headed off to the Sharm el-Sheikh summit with Egypt, Jordan and Abbas this week, Olmert said he wanted to "jointly work to create the platform that may lead to a new beginning between us and the Palestinians".

Did he mean partnership? A source in the Prime Minister's Office explained to the Jerusalem Post why the three nations and Abbas were meeting. "These are the four parties directly impacted by what is happening right now, and what is needed is a different level of cooperation between them." Another spokesman bewailed the failure so far to get the Saudis on board.

This appears to mark a sea change in Israeli thinking. Until now Tel Aviv has regarded the Palestinians as a domestic problem — after all, they are sitting on land that rightfully, at least if the Bible is to be believed, belongs to the Jews. Any attempt at internationalising the conflict has therefore been strenuously resisted.

But now the Israeli Prime Minister's Office is talking openly about getting the Arab world more directly involved, not only in its usual role as a mediator with the Palestinians, nor even in simply securing the borders against smuggling, but also in policing the territories. Israel hopes that Egypt, in particular, is as concerned as Tel Aviv by the emergence of a Hamastan on its borders, and may be enticed to use the same repressive policies against Gaza's Islamists as it does against its own.

Similarly, Olmert's chief political rival, Binyamin Netanyahu of Likud, has mentioned not only Egyptian involvement in Gaza but even a Jordanian military presence in the West Bank. The "moderate" Arab regimes, as Washington likes to call them, are being seen as the key to developing new ideas about Palestinian "autonomy" and regional "confederation". As long as Israel has a quisling in the West Bank and a beyond-the-pale government in Gaza, it may believe it can corner the Arab world into backing such a "peace plan".

What will it mean in practice? Possibly, as Zvi Barel of Haaretz speculates, we will see the

emergence of half a dozen Palestinian governments in charge of the ghettos of Gaza, Ramallah, Jenin, Jericho, and Hebron. Each may be encouraged to compete for patronage and aid from the “moderate” Arab regimes but on condition that Israel and the US are satisfied with these Palestinian governments’ performance.

In other words, Israel looks as if it is dusting off yet another blueprint for how to manage the Palestinians and their irritating obsession with sovereignty. Last time, under Oslo, the Palestinians were put in charge of policing the occupation on Israel’s behalf. This time, as the Palestinians are sealed into their separate prisons masquerading as a state, Israel may believe that it can find a new jailer for the Palestinians — the Arab world.

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