

A Familiar Scene in Gaza

As protestors in England gather en masse at the Israeli Embassy, the sky over the Middle East continues glow orange from the siege on Gaza.

by Benjamin Lawrence

But I guess we're almost immune to these images on our television screens and on the pages of our newspapers; we're desensitized almost to the point of disbelief. A dark night sky being lit up with explosions, neighbours frantically digging through rubble for some sign of life, mother's crying at the death of their children, the Middle East in crisis. Again. You could be forgiven for ignoring it, changing the channel or turning the page. After all, it is 'complicated'. But when 360 people die in any part of the world, no matter how complex the politics or how difficult it is to decipher right from wrong, the only humane thing to do (supposing you can't be there to help) is to ask questions. The most important one, of course, is not who or where or when or how, but why? However, for pretty much everyone involved (and even for those of us who think we aren't) the answers are often as uncomfortable to hear as they are difficult to understand.

Let's start with this: why is Israel dropping millions, probably billions, of dollars worth of bombs on the city of Gaza? Firstly, it is in reaction to the rockets which continue to be fired from the city into Israeli territory by Hamas, the 'terrorist' organization – according to the US – that controls the area. But knowing that those rockets from Gaza have, over the course of the last 8 years, killed just 10 people, the current Israeli reaction seems a little, how should I put it, 'disproportionate'. So, why so many people? Is it because they feel they *need* to? Or is it just because they *can*? Well, it's both. Firstly, Israel is convinced that the only language that Hamas, and the civilian population of Gaza (over 80% of whom live in dire conditions in refugee camps, having been forced out of their homes in what is now Israel), understand is violence and suffering. Thus, Israel sees the use of overwhelming force as the only way to deter the 'terrorists' and stop the rockets. Then, of course, there's the fact that Israel *can* drop tons upon tons of the most technologically advanced bombs and be responsible for the deaths of 360 people, an unknown number of whom are civilians, and know that it will suffer absolutely no repercussions. And why? Well, because it's happened before, countless times and nothing has happened. Now, again, it's the same story, Israel decides that the death of around 10 people is justification for an all out siege that kills hundreds; meanwhile the rest of the world offers only a tacit condemnation, or a call for 'restraint', and then, of course, some more weapons to carry on the killings.

So, as we sit here and 'do the math', as we work out the ratio (now about 36 Palestinian deaths to every 1 Israeli), and realise that firing rockets into Israel is basically a suicide note from the people of Gaza, why do the rockets still drop? This answer, more than any other, is prone to over-simplification. It is because Hamas is a violent group. A 'terrorist' group (whatever that means nowadays) in the words of Israel and the West. But why? And why do ordinary Palestinians accept their leadership knowing that it could, at times like this, cost them their lives? Putting aside the faintly racist notion proposed by

some that Palestinians are somehow innately violent, the answer lies in history. It begins in 1948, when the majority of Gaza's current inhabitants were dispossessed of their land and forced South into refugee camps by a war that ended in the creation of the Israeli state and the fragmentation of any potential Palestinian one. Later, following the Six Day War of 1967, even the refugee camps of Gaza came under the control of Israel, despite the predictably timid condemnations coming from Europe and the US. Since then, Israel has, in varying degrees, maintained a presence in Gaza despite promising a complete withdrawal from the territory in the 1993 Oslo Accords. Meanwhile, over the last 18 months that Hamas has been in control of Gaza, its occupants have been subjected to an Israeli blockade that has stopped food, water, electricity and even medical supplies from reaching those in need. With a desperate population becoming ever-more frustrated with its Israeli neighbours who, even through a relatively successful 6 month ceasefire, continued to prevent them importing the basic necessities, it became almost inevitable – although certainly not justifiable – that rockets would once again begin to fly over the border.

So, what comes next? As you read this, Hamas and Israel continue to trade rockets for bombing raids. Meanwhile, our television screens and newspapers are filling up with images of Israeli ground forces, preparing for an invasion and occupation of Gaza, much like the ones that have been a recurring feature of life in Gaza since 1967. Inevitably, we are led to the question, will it work? Will Israeli violence (call it retaliation if you like) end the stream of rockets? Of course not. If 40 years of suffering at the hands of occupation, embargoes and bombing raids hasn't forced the small and deeply impoverished population of Gaza into submission (in fact, it has made them more violent), what makes us – and I include the US, Britain and the rest of Europe in this – surely we can't expect it to work now. But, alas, the tanks keep arriving on the border, and the night sky keeps flashing, buildings keep on collapsing, and mothers keep on crying, and Israel and her allies around the world keep on ignoring the past, hoping this time round it has to work.