

Gaza: A Dark History Shared by Israelis and Palestinians

Written by Martin Duffy

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MARTIN DUFFY, NOV 7 2023

Conflict theorists invariably portray parties as proverbial “scorpions in the bottle” engaging in atavistic self-destruction. This theory was set out in Northern Ireland by the late John Darby where the 1998 Good Friday Agreement has (since) shown that antagonistic enemies may embrace peace. As someone who has served frequently in the Palestinian Authority and Gaza, I am mindful of how difficult it is to reach consensus about contentious political events. Often the best one can achieve is to listen to those contested voices, which is what I have done for this article. I do so in the knowledge that Gaza’s dark history is one which troubles the daily lives and tortured minds of Palestinians and Israelis alike.

During the 1948 war, large numbers of Palestinians fled to Gaza, which was then controlled by Egypt. In the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, Israel captured Gaza, the West Bank and East Jerusalem. The first Palestinian intifada erupted in Gaza in December 1987 as Hamas was founded. The Oslo peace process gave it limited autonomy in Gaza and parts of the occupied West Bank. Israel withdrew its troops and Jewish settlements from Gaza in 2005. Hamas has controlled Gaza since 2007, after winning a majority of seats in a Palestinian legislative.

My first assessment was that the Hamas attacks genuinely took all sides by surprise. Within a couple of days, by phone, I had participated in one-to-one or group interviews which included a contact in the press office of Hamas, a prominent Israeli peace activist, an experienced physician, and an IDF staffer. My intention was to try to establish a profile of personal experience on the ground. In particular, I wanted to have some sense of Hamas thinking. I wanted to assess if the Israeli peace movement could still be intact. Above all, I wanted to hear a medical voice.

Listening to a Hamas representative, at the end of October 2023, his feedback was highly reflective. The consensus was that the dark history co-joining Israelis and Palestinians in Gaza, was much more than just conflicting political or religious cultures:

This dark history is part of the psyche of the Palestinian people and I suppose we must acknowledge that the opposite is true, that it is the worst nightmare of those on the Israeli side who can never sleep for fear of attack... But it is neither an equal conflict nor a fair one. It is we (Palestinians) who are oppressed. It is we (Palestinians) who have lost our land....It we (Palestinians) who are imprisoned in Gaza. It is we (who are forbidden our land) who are the worst treated refugee populations of all the world. I am sure the great Edward Siad one of the most articulate spokespersons of our plight, would not have expected to die with the situation for ordinary Palestinians now far worse than when he started writing.... Intifada came twice...and things got no better. Our neighbour, that scorpion you talk about, built on our land with zealots who only wanted to annihilate us....Then Israel began to elect politicians who had more in common with the gruesome people of their own dark history- of WW2...That dark history repeats itself and those who were society’s greatest victims show themselves to be among the worst victimisers....That is why war comes again to haunt us...

Israelis and Palestinians now face their deadliest encounters in fifty (mostly) bloody years, with painfully increasing numbers dead on both sides. The now almost total war between Israel and Hamas, the preeminent militant group on the Gaza Strip, is an enduring conflict between Israelis and Palestinians that has destabilized economies and

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fractured the prospects of wider Middle East peace. These two peoples seem condemned to continuous self-destruction after so many frustrated efforts of localized truce and international peace-making. To add to the world's oldest refugee crisis, over three hundred thousand further Gazan people are homeless, according to UNRWA.

Hamas, the Palestinian militant group with overall power in the Gaza Strip, brutally attacked a pop concert, Israeli settlements and kibbutz in the borders of Gaza, causing Israel to declare war. Hamas showed no mercy to civilian targets and they took over two hundred Israeli hostages. Hamas militants justified their invasion as moral retribution for the deteriorating conditions for Palestinians living under Israeli occupation. In previous negotiations with Qatar, Egypt and the UN, Hamas had been pressing for sizable Israeli concessions on the 16-year blockade on the Gaza Strip. They got nowhere with these discussions and (perhaps) the surprise attacks might be interpreted as a chilade of anger, the outworking of some fifty-six years of imprisonment in 'the largest prison in the world'. Hamas officials referenced the Al-Aqsa Mosque site in Jerusalem, which is sacred to both Muslims and Jews. Disputes over the site, known to Jews as the Temple Mount, have resulted in violence before — including the brutal 2021 "eleven-day" war.

Israel then cut off food, water, electricity and other supplies to the Gaza Strip in what would amount to a total siege of one of the most impoverished and densely populated territories in the world. Speaking on conditions of anonymity to a prominent Israeli peace activist, one has a sense of the peace message 'gone hoarse', in the midst of such atrocity:

We have stood for peace with Palestinians for many decades. When I say that we just do not mean no fighting. I mean we stand for mutual respect, for co-existence, yes even among most of us for some kind of two state solution. We have faced every kind of insult, intimidation and even assassination attempt from the extremists in our own camps....Death threats, bullying of our own children, bombs, turds in the mail... I cannot begin to say what is the lot of an Israeli peace activist....And you know what? Some of my peace friends are saying how little have we achieved, and how little we have left to convince us to continue. And yet at least some of us are still protesting and still saying that peace is right....But I cannot pretend to you that when we woke up to the latest macabre events, and to the sight of the torture perpetuated by animals, people who pretend to represent the Palestinians. And when we see our brother Israelis kidnapped and held to ransom in Gaza and used as human shields, I cannot begin to try to persuade you that we as peace activists find it hard to turn the other cheek to that monstrous atrocity....So I will tell you honestly that I have difficulty getting on with this work now...."

Dr. Hammam Alloh, a consultant physician in Gaza City, suggests Israel's blockade, "always necessitated rationing drugs, blood products, fresh water and power, and that this is just an intensification". In the same interview, his medical colleague asks some crucial questions about humanitarianism in war:

President Biden begs for new humanitarian corridors. Does he think Israel is a humanitarian actor? Look, this is not the first time the roads to Gaza got stopped. This is a typical Israeli tactic. It is like the prison guard in this big prison which is the territory of Gaza, turning off the privileges to the convicts who are held captive in their own land by the Israeli security apparatus- the colonizers- the occupiers- the enemy. It is like the prison guard saying- shoot us and you get no food. Oppose us and you get not convict privileges. Prisoner 100- you are going to detention even worse than what you have already in the prison that is Gaza. You now also get hard labour trying to retrieve the bodies of the loved ones you have lost in the debris of the buildings Israel destroyed. Go dig your own graves in Gaza.

Israeli warplanes bombed Gaza repeatedly since the Hamas operation, ahead of offensives to root out Hamas. A ground invasion is already underway according to Israel Defence Forces. Anonymously, a military officer agreed to say the following:

In decades of service I have never seen such a resolve on the part of Israeli people. In every other country when word comes out for reservist's, people often run to the hills. We had traffic jams from the moment of the attacks. I mean no-one waited for the mobilization. We had so many reservists reporting for duty we could barely process them. I am a professional military man... I am not a man of emotion. I am sorry to say that it can never be the same again. Any moderate feeling that we found among the young generation for example, kids that had never seen Hamas violence up front- well now sometimes the young ones are among the most extreme. I feel the violence and despair in their voice. This attack is a game changer. I think we can never look at Palestinians in the same way again. I think it

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would take generations to forgive and the children and the grandchildren of those who witnessed and now forensically confront these latest massacres... Hamas is to blame...Well forget any hope that they will be aspiring for another Oslo- or another anything, except maybe another wall or a better gun to defend Israel with....

Unfortunately, the conflict now appears insoluble. This latest return to the darkest episodes of a grim history is like that ghostly, flickering filmography of the 1947-49 Palestine war, renewed. Whether Israeli or Palestinian, the voices and the toll of loss have seldom seemed starker.

About the author:

Martin Duffy has participated in more than two hundred international election and human rights assignments since beginning his career in Africa and Asia in the 1980s. He has served with a wide range of international organizations and has frequently been decorated for field service, among them UN (United Nations) Peacekeeping Citations and the Badge of Honour of the International Red Cross Movement. He has also held several academic positions in Ireland, UK, USA and elsewhere. He is a proponent of experiential learning. He holds awards from Dublin, Oxford, Harvard, and several other institutions including the Diploma in International Relations at the University of Cambridge.