

Developments in Gaza

Now that there is a lull in the fighting in and around Gaza – and it really is hard to dignify the present precarious situation by any word that implies durability, however hard some may try to talk it up – this debate provides an occasion to situate recent events there in the wider but no less depressing continuum of the Arab-Israel dispute and to attempt to draw some lessons for the way ahead. Each time the situation around Israel's borders erupts into violence we say 'it could not be worse than this'; and each time it is. So the first lesson to be drawn is not that the search for a comprehensive, negotiated solution is futile, but that it is more necessary and more urgent than ever.

It is difficult to believe that there are any real victors from the last few weeks of terror. Israel may conceivably have increased its deterrent capability, but it has not advanced its strategic objective of living in peace and security with its Arab neighbours. On the contrary it has almost certainly strengthened the forces of extremism throughout the region; not only has it failed to crush Hamas as a political force in Gaza, but it appears to have boosted its support in the West Bank. Hamas for its part has pursued a policy which has brought unconscionable suffering on its own people whom it has proved unable to protect, while the intransigence of its leaders' statements has done little to enhance its case for inclusion in any negotiations for a settlement. The word 'disproportionate' has been much used, and rightly so when describing Israel's response to Hamas' pretty ineffective but unacceptable bombardment of its territory. But what is undeniably disproportionate is the benefit to any of the protagonists when set against the massive suffering inflicted on the civilian populations. Yet another reason to promote comprehensive negotiations for a settlement, not merely to fiddle about trying to patch things up in and around Gaza.

One of the walking wounded from the recent conflict has of course been the United Nations. When the Security Council finally managed to reach agreement on a resolution, it was promptly weakened by the US abstention and rejected by both parties to the conflict, each secure in the knowledge that no serious consequences would flow from this rejection. That is no way to enhance the credibility of one of the few instruments we have to pursue a peaceful rather than a violent solution in the Middle East. Let us try to ensure that that experience is not repeated and that with a new US administration in place the international community can achieve a greater degree of unity and effectiveness in the future. And, while recognising the damage done to the UN's reputation, let us not overlook the remarkable work done by UNRWA and the other international humanitarian agencies in mitigating the suffering of Gaza's civilian population. The attacks on UN premises and personnel cannot be justified by any specious excuses. Can the Noble Lord the Minister assure the House that the Government will press for the holding of an objective international inquiry into the circumstances surrounding these attacks; and also into the allegations that white phosphorus was used in ways that were not consistent with Israel's obligations under the Geneva Conventions? When I raised these matters last week with the Israeli Ambassador he said his government did not believe that international inquiries were objective. This view would have been more convincing if the government of Israel has ever permitted or cooperated with an international inquiry.

Clearly the immediate plight of Gaza and its inhabitants will, quite rightly, be the focus of much short-term activity including the provision of generous humanitarian aid which underlines the aberration of the BBC's refusal to screen the DEC appeal; it is to be hoped that this will neither be aimed at a simple return to the status quo ante, nor just to sterile manoeuvring over the status of the two principal parties – Israel and Hamas – such as has so far prevented a more robust, agreed ceasefire coming into effect, and which appears to be hampering the rapid delivery of reconstruction aid. The minimum changes to the status quo would seem to amount to some much more robust arrangements, subject to international monitoring, for preventing the smuggling of weapons and munitions across Gaza's border with Egypt and the opening up of all Gaza's entry points from Israel to the free and unimpeded flow of humanitarian supplies and all that is required for reconstruction. And free and unimpeded must surely mean a situation where Israel cannot treat the crossings as choke points, to be opened and closed at their will for political purposes. Are those the objectives of government policy? And what prospects are there for securing them?

Far more important, however, than these specifically Gazan problems, is the wider challenge of breathing new life into the overall peace process. The government's statement on 12 January that it supported the formation of a National Unity Government by the Palestinians was very welcome. Such a government, committed to negotiating with Israel within the framework of the Arab Peace Initiative, would provide a much stronger platform than the current post-Annapolis structure. Equally welcome was the Noble Lord the Minister's statement that Her Majesty's Government would deal directly with any Hamas members of such a government. This implicit recognition of the fundamental bankruptcy of the policy of squeezing, boycotting and trying to crush Hamas, which Israel has championed and in which we have acquiesced for far too long, is as wise as it is overdue. Is it not clear that offering Hamas a politically feasible route into the peace process is far the best way of ensuring the peace process' viability and of undermining extremism, both within the ranks of Hamas, and more widely throughout the Arab world?

A good deal has been said in recent days about the waning of support among Arabs for a two-state solution; and the wise words of Prince Turki al-Faisal warning us of that should be heeded. Indeed it would be surprising if the traumas of the last few weeks had not had that effect, in the short term at least. But developments in and around Gaza have in fact demonstrated the need for such a solution. It is the failure of both Israel and Hamas to recognise the other's territorial integrity and right to live in peace and security which is at the root of the problem. So these developments have underlined, not undermined, the case for a two-state solution. Is there really any viable alternative? I doubt it. I would hazard a guess in any case that now that President Obama has thrown his weight behind the negotiating process for a two-state solution this will greatly strengthen its credibility and the support for it of all but the most extreme elements and their backers, who will remain spoilers to the end.

In that context could I, on a personal note, welcome most sincerely and most enthusiastically the appointment of Senator George Mitchell as the new President's

Special Envoy? For the last seven years I have had the honour to serve with Senator Mitchell on a Panel devoted to encouraging the social and economic programmes for developing a remote region of Indonesia. I know of no-one whose integrity, courtesy and fundamental decency, would make them better suited to this Promethean task.

It is always easy to take a cynical and pessimistic view about the prospects for a peace settlement in the Middle East – easy, but wrong. I hope the government will not succumb to that temptation.