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May 26, 2021

**On Israel and Palestine**

Joe Biden came into office wanting to focus on key US foreign policy priorities – checking China’s rise, and mending fences with Western allies.

Getting involved in the Middle East, and particularly the Israeli-Palestinian issue, was not on his agenda. Yet when hostilities between Israel and Hamas broke out, he was forced to get involved. It became clear to Biden that the standard US presidential talking point – ‘we support Israel’s right to defend itself’ – would not suffice.

The whole world was watching the lopsided balance of power, and death and damage to innocent civilians in Gaza. Rockets fired by Hamas into Israel were mostly intercepted by the US taxpayer-funded ‘Iron Dome’. A few got through, killing 12 people.

In addition, there was a vocal group within the Democratic Party that was sharply critical of Israeli actions. Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont gave a 15-minute blistering speech on the floor of the Senate articulating the injustices of the Israeli bombing raids. The two Muslim women in the House of Representatives and other progressives did not shy away from commenting. As always, discussion started about who initiated this most recent cycle of violence – each side choosing a starting point most beneficial to their case.

There should have been nothing surprising about this flare up to anyone who has paid attention to what has been going on in the occupied Palestinian territories. Over the past two decades, under successive right-wing Israeli governments, expansion of Jewish settlements into Palestinian lands has continued unabated.

This has been backed by a regime of laws instituted by Israel that systematically deprive the occupied Palestinian population of basic rights. In 2018, the Knesset passed a law affirming Israel a “nation-state of the Jewish people”, further adding that the right to self-determination is “unique to the Jewish people”, relegating Israel’s 20 percent Arab citizens to second-class status.

Residents of the occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem continued to suffer daily humiliation and worse at the hands of Israeli police and Jewish Settlers. The Gaza Strip with a population of two million has become the world’s largest open-air prison. Nothing gets in or out of Gaza without the approval of Israel, smuggling tunnels notwithstanding. There is no large population in recent memory that has been so systematically and so brutally treated.

The history of the Palestinian struggle goes back decades, even a century. None of that matters anymore. To understand the current circumstance, one has to just look at recent reports by two prominent human rights organizations. Human Rights Watch issued a well-researched, in-depth report accusing Israel of being an apartheid state in their treatment of its Palestinian population. “Israeli authorities are committing ... systematic oppression against the Palestinian population ... with discriminatory intent to maintain Jewish domination over them,” the report concludes.

B’Tselem, a Jerusalem-based human rights organization, reported: “... the entire area between the Mediterranean Sea and Jordan River is organized under a single principle: advancing and cementing the supremacy of one group – Jews - over another - Palestinians”. “This is apartheid,” the report concludes.

American politicians have a very selective view of this conflict. Acts of provocation by Israeli authorities are ignored until those living under occupation react. Even acts of nonviolent resistance such as the Boycott Divest Sanction (BDS) movement are being criminalized by many US states. Yet, there is a shift taking place in American political discourse. The public is increasingly exposed to information about the brutality of Israeli occupation through social media which is changing perceptions.

However, the fractious politics and rampant corruption within the Palestinian side – for example, in the the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and Hamas in Gaza – too is an issue and will not guarantee a route to freedom.

At the conclusion of hostilities last week, over 250 Palestinians – including more than 60 children – lay dead in Gaza; victims of Israeli bombing. For Hamas to claim victory and break out in jubilation upon the declaration of ceasefire was a sad spectacle.

Saddest of all is the death of the two-state solution and the so-called peace process. Peace, after all, is the outcome of a just resolution. The ever-increasing Jewish settlements in occupied territories have made that impossible. Now there exists only one binational state with roughly equal numbers of Jewish and Palestinian residents. The struggle needs to move on to one for equal rights for Palestinians within the state they find themselves in.

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