**The art of deception**

Marwan Bishara

Wednesday, Nov 10, 2021

Israeli hyperbole is as old as the Israeli state. It is tautological, serving as the raison d’etre and modus operandi of Israel, the garrison state. It is farcical, fantastical, and also dangerous in the way it surpasses mere rhetoric to shape the country’s strategy in Palestine and the Middle East in general.

For decades, Israel hyped and manufactured threats – grave threats, existential threats – using them as a pretext for preemptive wars and justification for holding onto occupied territories. It demonised the Palestinians and the Arabs as hateful ‘terrorists’ bent on the destruction of Israel. It exaggerated Iran’s capacity and intention to develop and deploy nuclear weapons. And of late, its spokespersons and supporters have invariably charged critics with anti-Semitism.

Israel has skillfully and successfully peddled and amplified these and other charges, especially after its 1967 war victory and occupation, elevating hyperbole into an art form of deception, extortion, and propaganda. It has regularly claimed that for the sake of its national security, even survival, it had ‘ein breira’ (no alternative) but to launch into this or that illegal or horrific invasion, occupation, mass incarceration, assassination, or preemptive attack.

So, it should have come as no surprise when, last month, Israel designated six prominent Palestinian human rights groups as ‘terrorist organisations’, only a few days before announcing a big settlement expansion in the occupied West Bank. Though largely fabricated or unsubstantiated, the designation has put the Palestinians on the defensive and shifted the international attention away from Israel’s own occupation and terror.

The Israeli responsible for both decisions is none other than the war general cum defence minister Benny Gantz. It was he who led the Israeli assault against the Gaza Strip in 2014 and who stands accused of war crimes for the death of more than 2,000 Palestinians, including more than 500 children. And it was he who ran for parliament in 2019 on a record of bloodshed, boasting of killing 1,364 ‘terrorists’, read civilians.

Does this sound like a person with any legitimacy to judge Palestinians? Indeed, do occupiers have any legitimacy to judge the occupied?

Well, he is not alone. In fact, Gantz echoes a whole class of hysteric cynics, no less his current and previous bosses, premiers Naftali Bennett and Benjamin Netanyahu.

In 2015, Bennett, the religious extremist settler leader cum minister of education, called Israel’s rather moderate partner, President Mahmoud Abbas, ‘a terrorist’, and declared that Israel “should not speak with him”. Today, Prime Minister Bennett uses the same pretext to boycott Abbas and evade any meaningful diplomacy with the Palestinians. Of course, he is also punishing the Palestinian president for taking Israel to the International Criminal Court for its war crimes in Palestine.

Israel does not only hype and deflect charges of its own state terrorism; it does the same on the nuclear front as well.

For almost three decades, Israel’s longest-serving prime minister, Netanyahu, led the charge against Iran, accusing it of secretly developing nuclear weapons for use against Israel, and advocated for nothing short of sweeping sanctions and/or preferably war against the Iranian regime. Israel has claimed Iran would produce a bomb by 1998, 1999, 2000, 2004, 2005, 2010, 2011, 2013, 2014 and 2015 and almost every year since.

Netanyahu may have failed to convince western powers to use force against “evil Iran”, as they did against Iraq, but he generally succeeded in blackmailing them into maintaining crippling sanctions against the Iranians. Hyping the Iranian nuclear threat also allowed him to keep Israel’s own nuclear weapons off the table, ensure Israel’s total regional military superiority at no financial cost, and insist on total liberty of action against Iran and its allies.

In that way, hyperbole has been effective with foes and friends alike.

It has proved a winning strategy in dealing with Israel’s own allies, especially the United States. Take for example the Israeli tantrums against the two most pro-Israeli US presidents, Ronald Reagan and George W Bush.

In 1981, Prime Minister Menachem Begin accused the US of treating Israel like a ‘banana republic’ and hinted of ‘anti-Semitic overtones’ in some of the punitive measures the Reagan administration took after it denounced the Israeli bombing of the Iraqi nuclear reactor, its bombing of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) headquarters in Beirut that led to the killing of many civilians, and its annexation of the occupied Syrian Golan Heights, all in violation of international law.

Soon after, the US reversed its punitive measures and Israel became by far the biggest recipient of US aid, its status elevated to the US’s most valued ally in the Middle East. Feeling empowered, Israel invaded Lebanon under the pretext of combatting terrorism, leading to tens of thousands of Palestinian and Lebanese casualties and an 18-year occupation of south Lebanon.

Twenty years later, another war general cum prime minister, Ariel Sharon, warned the United States against appeasing Arab nations at the expense of Israel the way European democracies appeased Hitler on the eve of World War II, in response to the Bush administration’s plans for a “global coalition against terrorism” after the attacks of 9/11.

In the following decade, Israel emerged as the closest partner and biggest winner from Washington’s global war on terror, using its privileged status to violently crush the second Palestinian intifada.

In the 2010s, Israel humiliated President Barack Obama on Iran and Palestine, accusing him of supporting dangerous diplomacy with both, which according to Bennett, would lead to “the mass murder of Israelis”. Rattled by Israeli hyperbole, Obama went on to boost US security guarantees, subsidise Israeli defence, and commit $38bn in military aid.

Israel did not spare its European allies either. In 2015, its then-foreign minister, Avigdor Lieberman, accused them of ‘betrayal’ and ‘fueling ani-Semitism’ for merely supporting Palestinian statehood, going as far as drawing parallels with European powers abandoning Czechoslovakia to the Nazis in 1938.

In that way, Israeli hyperbole has been a remarkable success. It has galvanised Western supporters and blackmailed Western leaders into shutting up or speaking up for Israel, rendering them conciliatory or complicit with its wars, crimes and war crimes.

None of the above is meant to downplay Israel’s own immediate national security concerns. But its hyperbole has been a tool of expansion and domination rather than survival.

Excerpted: ‘Israeli hyperbole: The art of deception’ Aljazeera.com