



Post-Gaza realism

Jan. 27, 2009
 EMMANUEL NAVON , THE JERUSALEM POST

As US Special Envoy for Middle East Peace George Mitchell arrives here for his first mission, a couple of weeks before Israel's general election, two questions arise. One is whether the new American administration is correct in assuming that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict can be brought to an end just by "trying harder" with what has consistently failed in the past fifteen years. The second question is whether electing an Israeli government which does not share that assumption might not spell trouble for the future of Israel's "special relationship" with the United States. The answer to both questions is no.

Israel has not been ignoring the need to find what pundits call a "political solution." Without getting into the blame game, the fact is that negotiations have been conducted, unsuccessfully, for the past 15 years.

If the Israeli-Palestinian conflict cannot be solved in the short term, it has to be managed. But how? The rationale of the disengagement strategy was that, since the conflict seems unsolvable and since the status quo is untenable, Israel might as well get the Palestinians off its back. If only. We left Gaza, but Gaza did not leave us.

Yet if the price for preventing rocket firing is the yearly reenactment of a "Cast Lead" kind of military operation, one question must be asked. Not a single rocket was fired at us from the south when Israel fully controlled the Gaza Strip (i.e. before the Oslo agreements). The price for this quiet status quo was a military occupation for which both Israeli society and world public opinion had lost patience. But how exactly was that occupation less moral than the death and destruction we now had to inflict to stop Hamas from firing rockets? Since relinquishing control over Gaza means destroying it every so often to protect our citizens, it is not only that Israel's unilateral withdrawal from Gaza generated a more challenging military and strategic threat. It also weakened our moral standing.

Israel, of course, is not going to reoccupy Gaza, and the likely scenario for the coming years is a long term war of attrition with the cursed enclave. This is more bearable and manageable than the similar type of warfare we had with Egypt after the Six Day War, unless the US is unable, or unwilling, to deter and neutralize Iran's regional troublemaking.

ONE THING is clear, though. Reenacting the "brilliant idea" of the Gaza withdrawal in Judea and Samaria would be suicidal at this point. Israel put an end to massive suicide bombings and shooting attacks by taking control of what was transferred to the PA under the Oslo accords. This is an undisputable fact. The present situation in Judea and Samaria is far from being ideal. It raises the same moral questions that paved the way to Oslo in the first place. But is it more moral to let our citizens be slaughtered by suicide bombers? Since we are in a Catch-22 type of situation anyway, we might as well prevent the ugly and relentless terrorism that prevailed between the Camp David Summit and Operation Defensive Shield.

While we should continue to strive for a political solution, we have to understand that the more the Palestinians feel that we cannot do without such a solution, the less likely they will be to compromise. Managing the conflict, at this point, means making the status quo both bearable and changeable.

Our neighbors need to be convinced that Israel is here to stay in order to consider making peace with us. The "Iron Wall" strategy worked with Egypt. The fact that it does not seem to impress Hamas and Iran (at least until Operation "Cast Lead") is mostly Israel's fault. Unbelievably, *The Economist* wrote recently that "A new obstacle to peace is the apparent crumbling of Jabotinsky's iron wall" ("The Hundred Years War," January 10).

What *The Economist* is implying is that chances of reaching a "cold peace" type of agreement with the Palestinians depend on the restoration of Israel's deterrence. Coming from a relentless critic, this is a welcome recommendation indeed.

Israelis have two weeks to choose a leadership that can be trusted to restore its deterrence and thus improve the chances of preventing future wars. Those who cut-and-ran from southern Lebanon and from Gaza cannot be reasonably trusted to fulfill this vital task.

The writer is the founding partner of the Navon-Levy Group Ltd. and a lecturer at the Abba Eban Graduate Program for Diplomacy Studies at Tel-Aviv University.

This article can also be read at <http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1233050188707&pagename=JPArticle%2FShowFull>
 [[Back to the Article](#)]

Copyright 1995- 2009 The Jerusalem Post - <http://www.jpost.com/>