

PULLING OUR PUNCHES

Simon Titley examines how Liberal Democrats should react to the crisis in the Middle East

Only the other week, I was asked to review a new book about the Middle East. 'The New Intifada' is a series of essays about the plight of the Palestinians, written from a variety of perspectives. The book had been published only last November. It provides a very good historical explanation of events. Then events on the ground took another nasty turn.

It is always tempting fate to write about this subject. Events change day by day and, since you'll be reading this at least two or three weeks after I've written it, who knows what the situation will be like by then. So many words are being written in the media that it is difficult to find anything original to say. But what makes it hardest are the taboos surrounding Israel.

We are told that it is none of our business and there is nothing we can do. Older Liberals will recall a cautionary tale about grandstanding on international affairs. The Liberal Party Assembly in Torquay in 1958 was held not only at the nadir of Liberal fortunes but also when the foreign news event of the day was the conflict between Communist China and Formosa (Taiwan) over the coastal island of Quemoy. The Party President, Sir Arthur Comyns-Carr, warned the Assembly in stern tones "nothing we should do must exacerbate the situation in Quemoy." The party never lived it down.

The Middle East is different. Our opinions matter because the climate of opinion in the west is Israel's first line of defence. The lobby is an integral part of Israeli foreign and defence policy. It is what emboldens Israel to act as it does. Whatever it may claim, Israel cannot function without continued western support, particularly from the USA, but also from the EU, which takes 40% of Israel's exports. Whether we, as political activists in Britain, support one side or the other or remain silent, we cannot help but influence that climate.

The only reason Israel can flout international law with impunity is because the pro-Israeli lobby's strategy is to inhibit criticism and sanctions. Non-Jews who criticise Israel are invariably accused of anti-Semitism. Jews who criticise Israel are called 'self-haters'. The memory of the holocaust is invoked to defend anything Israel does. Discussion is presumed closed. In such a highly charged atmosphere, most people decide that discretion is the better part of valour and duck for cover.

On the whole this has been a very successful strategy. The most significant effect is not the isolation of critics, but the intimidation of the majority into silence or equivocation. Even as the truth about the slaughter in

Jenin emerges, western politicians and media feel obliged to adopt a spurious 'balance', which in any other context would be unthinkable. Even now, we still hear ritual calls from western politicians who, after criticising Ariel Sharon, then feel obliged to call on Yasser Arafat to "reign in terrorists", when it ought to be obvious that the besieged Arafat no longer has the capacity even to flush his own toilet.

The Israeli lobby has simultaneously argued that the conflict with the Palestinians is none of our business, while at the same time has expended huge efforts on persuading us of its case. For example, early this April at the plenary session of the European Parliament in Strasbourg, a massive lobby was mobilised in an attempt to defeat a motion critical of the Israeli invasion, in vain as it turned out.

But there is also a body of opinion with no strong views on the Middle East, which argues that this is a little local difficulty in a faraway land of which we know nothing. It doesn't affect us, it's more trouble than it's worth, they deserve each other, let them fight one another to a standstill. As we should have learned by now, if you don't visit the Middle East, it has a nasty habit of visiting you.

The dispute often spills over into Europe. Suez in 1956 and the 1973 oil crisis are the most notable examples. Today, it is leading to a deterioration of relationships between Jewish and Muslim communities in the west, with racist attacks on synagogues breaking out in France and Belgium. More than that, the current dispute is destabilising an entire region and threatens to plunge us all into war.

Even if there were no objective manifestations of the conflict in our countries, it would still matter to us because this is about the 'Holy Land', the location of places holy to the three great religions of Judaism, Islam and Christianity. At the time of writing, the Church of the Nativity, one of the holiest places in Christianity, has been under siege for more than two weeks.

Israel cannot place itself off limits. We cannot ignore it. This affects us, it's our business.

With an interest in the situation comes an obligation to help resolve it. With much hand wringing, we despair of ever finding a solution, when the shape of one is obvious to all but the most bigoted. It's spelt out in the Saudi peace plan and in the most recent UN resolution proposed by the USA. Israel withdraws to its pre-1967 borders (including the removal of the illegal settlements). Two sovereign states with mutual recognition. A sharing of Jerusalem. Border adjustments and land swaps by mutual agreement. Some form of

justice for Palestinian refugees. And, since neither side seems able or willing to guarantee the security of the other, there must be an international peace keeping force to enforce the agreement.

A political settlement, in other words. And what prevents this happening is a refusal to recognise the situation for what it is, colonial occupation. Israel is fighting to maintain some form of occupation; the Palestinians are fighting a nationalist war. The illegal occupation of the West Bank and Gaza are the underlying cause of the present problems and are at the root of the Palestinian grievance. Pretending that Israel and the Palestinians are somehow equal protagonists ignores the immorality of the occupation and the balance of power between occupiers and occupied.

The Israeli government depicts this situation solely in terms of Israel's 'security', as if this were simply a matter of law and order. In Ariel Sharon's lexicon, 'peace' means an absence of conflict on his terms. There is no component of justice.

Sharon is effectively offering the Palestinians a choice, of either permanent exile, or permanent subjugation and humiliation. No self-respecting human being would accept living on such terms. The Palestinians don't, and no one else should expect them to.

The reason Sharon and his supporters cannot see this is because they assume the Israelis are the only people with a narrative. It is simply inconceivable that anyone else might have any legitimate grievance or demand. From this self-centred perspective, it becomes easy to demonise all Palestinians as terrorists and all critics as anti-Semites. The terms "terrorist" and "anti-Semitic" are being bandied about so freely that the Israelis risk stripping them of any meaning.

Coupled with a selfish view has been the intense Israeli effort to shift the entire blame for the situation onto the Palestinians. It is plainly absurd to blame colonised people for their own occupation. And never in the recent history of colonialism have 'peace efforts' been based on a demand for the occupied to guarantee the safety of the occupier.

Central to the current Israeli arguments is that the Palestinians "had their chance" with the Oslo Agreements but "missed a golden opportunity" to accept a "generous offer". There is not only the dangerous assumption that political dialogue has been exhausted and that the only answer is military force. There is also the implication that the Palestinians have somehow forfeited their right to self-determination. This argument is disingenuous. Let us assume that the failure of the agreements was entirely the fault of the

Palestinians. Either the Israelis believe the Palestinians have a basic right to a state of their own, in which case any failure does not change that basic right, or they do not, in which case Israel was not negotiating in good faith.

We can now see Oslo as part of a pattern in which Israel has strung along the international community with a series of 'interim' agreements, measures designed to produce a ceasefire without ever resulting in a just resolution of the conflict. Demands for a 'ceasefire' now are pointless when the Israelis, by deliberately targeting the Palestinian Authority police force and security apparatus, have removed Arafat's capacity to impose any form of law and order. They also should not be a pre-condition for negotiations, since this gives any single extremist a veto over the whole process.

Sharon is hardly in a position to mourn the failure of Oslo. He consistently opposed the agreements and has done everything in his power to dismantle them. Even before he took power, the Israelis were not blameless. Since the Oslo accords were signed, Israeli settlements in the occupied territories have doubled in size. The Israelis continued their policies of collective punishments, demolition of houses, pillage of land and natural resources, closures, deportations, torture and assassinations. And all the while, militant Israeli settlers were frequently taking pot shots at Palestinians, most were never arrested and the few that were charged received derisory

sentences (we never heard the international community call on Israel then to "reign in its terrorists"). All of these activities were in breach of international law and all did nothing but undermine the position of Palestinian leaders prepared to negotiate.

Oslo was also intrinsically flawed. It envisaged a 'state' in the West Bank comprising three separate pieces of land surrounded by Israeli troops and settlers, without direct access to its own international borders. In return for prime agricultural land in the West Bank, the Palestinians would be given a strip of desert adjacent to the Gaza Strip that Israel currently uses for toxic waste dumping. The Palestinians would get only a few fragments of East Jerusalem. Prime Minister Barak was making not a "generous offer" to the Palestinians but only the trappings of statehood. The subjugation would have remained, and the international community would have endorsed the residual occupation. No wonder the Palestinians could not accept.

Another argument we hear from Israeli government spokesmen is that the Palestinians already controlled "95%" of their own people and thus no longer had a grievance. This is totally dishonest. The Israelis have confiscated 70% of the land in the West Bank and Gaza for settlements, along with most of the water supply,



agricultural land and natural resources. The Palestinians were corralled into towns and refugee camps. The Palestinian Authority's limited government was confined to a series of Bantustans.

But it is in the conduct of 'Operation Defensive Shield' that Sharon's case collapses. The ostensible motive was to "destroy the terrorist infrastructure." In reality, the objective seems to have been more of a scorched earth policy against all the institutions of Palestinian civil society. There has been a systematic destruction of infrastructure and dismantling of Palestinian Authority institutions, representing an attempt by Sharon to turn the clock back eight years before the signing of the Oslo peace accords.

Even if you believe a full-scale invasion was a justified response to terrorism, it is hard to understand how your goals could be achieved, for example, by ransacking the Palestinian Authority's statistics bureau, the education ministry and the ministry of local government in Ramallah. How is the deliberate destruction of 50 years' worth of school final examination results or land records or building permits supposed to stop suicide bombers?

A British resident of Ramallah, Tom Kay, reported how Israeli soldiers completely vandalised an eye clinic in a medical aid centre. "They pulled every machine on to the floor and smashed it. All the computers are gone, the optometric equipment was on the floor upside down, all the glasses are in piles on the floor." This eye clinic was not the scene of any fighting.

Worse still has been the deliberate obstruction of humanitarian aid, contrary to international law and all accepted norms of behaviour. Israelis attempting to deliver food and medical aid faced beatings by their own troops. There have also been numerous incidents of the Israeli army attacking ambulances and humanitarian aid convoys, even though these convoys had prior senior officer permission to travel. In the past 18 months, the Israeli army has damaged or destroyed 80 out of 100 Palestinian Red Crescent Society ambulances. On April 3rd, the Israeli army smashed five ambulances parked in a secure parking compound in Tulkarem belonging to the International Committee of the Red Cross.

The Israelis have also destroyed water and electricity facilities, homes and schools and have been shooting deliberately at journalists and unarmed peace demonstrators.

The World Bank estimates that the direct physical destruction of public infrastructure has cost \$600m to \$800m. It further estimates that most of the \$5 billion of investments made possible by international donor aid has been destroyed and that the economic loss to the Palestinian economy in GDP is about \$5 billion. Most of the infrastructure paid for and supplied by the European Union has been deliberately destroyed.

The Israeli public relations machine has gone into overdrive to justify what the Israeli army has done in the West Bank. Even though the full facts are not yet known, the Israelis have already been condemned by every reputable international body working on the ground; the ICRC (Red Cross), the World Bank, European Commission's humanitarian aid office, UNWRA, Amnesty International, plus numerous local human rights bodies, both Israeli and Palestinian. All criticise the denial of humanitarian aid and the damage to the economy.

Yet still there appears to be no shortage of people in the west prepared to play the role of cheerleader for Ariel Sharon. In April, members of the US Senate and Congress queued up to praise Benjamin Netanyahu, visiting Washington to win hearts and minds by conflating Palestinian nationalism with Osama Bin Laden. It was a sickening thought that many of the politicians on Capitol Hill pledging themselves to Israel's fight against terrorism were the very same people that blocked Britain's appeals to the US government to stop Noraid funding the IRA bombing campaign.

Armed force by itself cannot provide Israel with security. The 'terrorist infrastructure' consists of nothing more than a willingness on the part of some Palestinians to kill themselves. Sharon's invasion of the West Bank will make the security of Israel worse. It is ultimately self-defeating because it radicalises Palestinian opinion. With their economy in ruins and no political solution in sight, Palestinians will resort to ever more desperate means and no amount of sophisticated American weaponry will stop the killing.

This invasion will prove counter-productive. Israel's 18-year invasion of the Lebanon led to thousands of lives lost while achieving few if any of Israel's initial objectives. It radicalised previously moderate Lebanese people and created a new enemy in the form of Hezbollah. Likewise, the population of the West Bank and Gaza overwhelmingly opposes armed occupation, making it untenable in the long run. Sharon's strategy of humiliation will backfire.

But Sharon has trapped himself into a position where the only response he can offer to worsening security is military escalation. But how can he cap what he did in Jenin? Ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians (a course of action already openly advocated by some members of the Israel cabinet)? Killing Arafat? It would be hard to imagine more effective means of recruiting more suicide bombers.

This is why we have to refuse to be intimidated by the pro-Israeli lobby. Ariel Sharon, throughout his political and military career, has been someone with no moral borders. He has consistently shown savage brutality towards Arab civilians, and a callous disregard for international law and for the norms of civilised behaviour. If the lobby in the west were not protecting him, an international court for war crimes would long ago have indicted him.

But also, this about the consistent application of Liberal principles. When we pull our punches, when we indulge the current Israeli government, when we look the other way, we are in effect saying that we apply different standards of behaviour to different groups according to their race or religion. Double standards and equivocation corrode our own morality, distort international ethics and in the end do no one any favours.

Instead of intimidating their opponents, friends of Israel in the west would do better to focus on saving Israel from itself. The Saudi plan and latest UN resolution should be supported, not because they're perfect, but because all the alternatives are too awful to contemplate.

'The New Intifada - Resisting Israel's Apartheid', edited by Roane Carey, published by Verso, 2001, paperback £13