

The four lessons of Gaza

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The Israeli army's display of overwhelming force in Gaza during the three-week war of 2008-09 has not achieved its stated goal, as rockets continue to fall on southern Israel. This campaign by one of the world's best-equipped military machines, which killed more than 1,300 Palestinians and destroyed over 18,000 homes, has not been enough to provide the Israelis with the security they desperately seek.

Why is this? The answer is in part that the kind of power the Israelis excel in goes nowhere near to solving the heart of the problem they face - which lies inside themselves as much as in the Palestinians, their "other". Perhaps the answer has to be sought not - or not just - "externally" (in actions) but "internally" (in perceptions of self and other). After all, when a system is dysfunctional, more of the same does not work: it needs to change from the inside out.

In the light of this approach, the massive Israeli [attacks on Gaza](#) [5] - only the latest episode of a [deep-rooted](#) [6] and increasingly dangerous conflict - offer four lessons that must be learned:

- * demilitarising minds
- * creating reciprocity and dignity
- * overcoming fear and victimhood
- * forging human connections

Lesson one: demilitarising minds

The massive destruction unleashed against the people of Gaza, their houses and institutions, has not only created rage and despair, but also destroyed for most Palestinians the last vestiges of belief in the [possibility](#) [6] of peace - and therewith the belief that it is worth making the effort to reach out to Israelis.

This rage and despair make the Israelis less secure. The result of the massive and indiscriminate use of force is to diminish Israelis' as well as Palestinians' [human security](#) [7]. Both are locked in a (very asymmetrical) system that is dominated by fear, victimhood, violence, and (for most) a striking lack of empathy.

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A commitment to militarism and a belief in force permeate [8] every aspect of the relationship between the Palestinians and Israelis. The vast influx of weapons and investments in armed security services among the Palestinians (a key part of the peace agreements from 1994 onwards) have also significantly raised the dangers that men with guns always present.

The dangers are mutual; they cross the gulf of power. Yet a huge majority of Israelis were in favour of their army's operation. Many argue that showers of rockets had been fired from Gaza that made life unbearable for citizens in southern Israel; that therefore the Israelis had to attack Gaza for their security.

It is true that there have been a great many rockets, and it is terrible that the inhabitants of towns [9] such as Sderot and Beersheba live in danger and fear. But the trouble with this response is that it implies a parity of power and of levels of peril and fear. The denial of the scale of the suffering being inflicted on Gaza reveals a failure of recognition of the "other" community as composed of equal human beings.

The moral problem is interwoven with inequalities of power; power that is reflected in Israel's control of Palestinian lives. But these inequalities must also be disentangled for progress to become possible.

Lesson two: creating reciprocity and dignity

This inequality of power-relations permeates attitudes too. The Israelis' control over the Palestinians, expressed in many forms of humiliation [10] by their army and institutions, works against the attitude of respect for the equal dignity of all humans that is essential for sound relationships at all levels. The Palestinians' subjection [10] in turn is expressed in resentment and hatred - which will in time only make the Israelis less [10] secure.

A healthy and secure human society is based on reciprocity, and reciprocity assumes that each human being has the same right to dignity and respect. When that fundamental right is destroyed, so is society itself. Moreover, those who deny the dignity of others destroy their own dignity and self-respect in the process. Without reciprocal respect there can be no security.

This implies that the Israeli belief in the possibility of achieving security through military action [11] is an illusion. Israel currently exercises overwhelming dominance over the Palestinians; yet the more it tries to build its security on the insecurity of its neighbours, the more insecure it in fact becomes.

The principles of reciprocity and dignity are relevant at every level of the conflict, from the most immediate cases of justice to larger questions [11] of war crimes.

Lesson three: overcoming fear and victimhood

What can allow people, often educated and otherwise sensitive people, to react so callously to the killing of innocents, and the deprivation of their means [12] of life?

The psychology of fear and victimhood is central to the answer. The levels of trauma in both Israeli and Palestinian society reinforce both these feelings - with terrible effects [13] for the other. The emotion of fear can make morally reprehensible actions seem justifiable. The sense of victimhood tends to exclude the possibility of the victim being also a perpetrator, and to project all evil onto the other. The violence inflicted out of a sense of victimhood is perceived as justifiable self-defence even when perpetrated against a weaker party.

The result is to cancel the perception of the reality of violent acts and of the need for empathy. This moral blindness is increased when the conflict is misrepresented as a war between equals; for this belief leads the stronger side, the Israelis, to regard the weaker, Palestinian, side as even more threatening.

The tendency of "new wars" across the world is to become increasingly cruel and terroristic, targeting [13] civilians more than combatants. All members of the "other" community in effect become enemies and all casualties are excused. This destructive dynamic has to be broken from the inside.

Lesson four: forging human connections

What is left in seeking a way forward for peace? Who can talk to whom? When bombs and rockets have become the chosen method of communication, is talk even worthwhile?

The Palestinian "problem" [14] is fundamentally political, not humanitarian. It needs a sustainable political solution. This must involve satisfying the national aspirations, the security and the dignity of the Palestinians amid a broader agreement that guarantees Israeli security too. Many years of Israeli occupation, settlement [15], and assaults such as in Gaza have made such an outcome seem further away than ever.

Even to talk about it may appear empty, a form of self-indulgence and delusion. Yet where people are without empathy for others, including their enemies, this will in the end deprive themselves of any possibility of empathy from others. It is in the Israelis' own interest [15], as well as right in itself, that they begin to "see" and recognise the Palestinians and their predicament.

The implication is that people inside the conflict [16] need to be encouraged to make every effort to maintain their human connectivity, even perhaps taught to consciously cultivate empathy - in order precisely to overcome its dehumanising and polarising effects, and create a possible space for peace.

The working solution

Despite everything, it is still worth hoping for peace between Israelis and Palestinians. It is still worth believing that - with constructive support and pressure from outside - a viable two-state [16] solution can still be achieved, and that this is far more realistic than the "one-state" option. It is still worth trying to be creative in finding ways to transform mindsets away from militarism.

By doing all this, we can rekindle the innate human connections between peoples who have lived side-by-side in this region for many centuries, and begin to transform a desperate situation from war towards peace.

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