

## The Pacifist Sensibility



CLOCKWISE: Aleppo, Sana'a, Mosul, Khartoum

**IT'S PLAIN TO SEE** that for many people *feelings*, their feelings, matter much more than the truth. Their revulsion and horror of the killings in Gaza clearly trump any rational thoughts about war and its consequences. This leads them to insist that there is not a military solution to any conflict. Logically, they are pacifists, but not in any absolute or consistent sense, but as a general sensibility. This enables them to grieve over the 'senseless' killing of civilians the starving of the old and infirm, the bombing of hospitals, and the destruction of water and sewerage systems.

People of this sort, those with a pacifist cast of mind, seem to be blithely unaware that their horror at the slaughter of civilians is shared as much by the supporters of the Israel Defence Force (that is actually dealing out most of the death and destruction in Gaza), as those who wring their hands as they argue that Israel is creating more terrorists by the way it is conducting its war against Hamas.

They are unclear about how they think Israel should conduct the war, and prefer to argue for an immediate cease fire, for negotiations, or peace talks at any price, even suspending all attempts to crush Hamas. Peace, they say, is the only solution. Of course, this is not a recondite discussion. They are not thinking about 'Just War' theory, but are instead engaging in a down-to-earth discussion of their feelings and their horror at the 'senseless' killing of anybody, anybody at all.

Those ensnared by the pacifist sensibility are attempting to suppress politics with their feelings, and with their compassion for all concerned, on all sides. In this way they sidestep consideration of all military objectives, while they concentrate upon the human suffering involved in war.

A fine example of this was Fergal Keane's recent report posted from Jerusalem about a baby born by cesarean section which was performed on the child's dead mother who'd been killed during an Israeli air-raid. The rescued infant also died a few days later. This was a perfect opportunity for Fergal to do what he does best, keening about human suffering and inhumanity.

But this expression of naked human emotion and concern for humanitarian values actually leads us nowhere – it is intended to insist that our feelings of empathy should trump all consideration of politics, yet it precisely masks a political position. It masks the political insistence that Israel either cannot or should not attempt to crush Hamas. The war has "gone too far" and should be stopped on any terms, any terms at all. Peace should reign supreme.

This illusion, the illusion that one can get out from under politics, is widespread indeed. The belief that there exists a kind of moral sphere in which politics has no pull, no purchase, no relevance, seems to inform this kind of humanitarian thinking – it is boldly neutral, and even 'non-political', when it is calling for Israel to stop fighting.

The truth is, of course, that any calls for Israel to stop, or moderate its ruthless war against Hamas, is a political demand. It is a demand that in the interests of humanity Israel should give quarter to the architects of the October pogrom, and to a political movement, Hamas, which in statement after statement makes clear its intention to destroy the Jewish state, by orchestrating a reign of terror against its Jewish citizens. Despite the inattention of those in the grip of the pacifist sensibility, Hamas repeatedly declares its political position: the entire land between the river and the sea is an Islamic land bequeathed by Allah, the Most Merciful, to the Muslims for all eternity.

The war in Gaza is, like all wars, a political struggle, that can only be resolved by a political settlement forged through the defeat of one side by the other. Since around 1920 or thereabouts there has been a struggle between Arabs and Jews for the possession of land in what was at the outset Mandate Palestine. When the territory was partitioned between Arabs and Jews by the United Nations in 1947 the Arabs rejected the idea in its entirety, demanding the whole of the old imperial Ottoman provinces for the Arabs. From the outset they rejected the idea of a Jewish territory – all should be governed by Arabs.

In 1948, on the declaration of the state of Israel within the terms of the UN partition, the Syrian, Egyptian, and Jordanian armies, together with Palestinian militias declared war on the fledgling Jewish state – their intention was to strangle Israel at birth. They failed, and ever since, the principal Palestinian political organisations have been committed to reversing the outcome of the war of 1948 with the destruction of Israel. They have often ducked and weaved around the idea of a two-state solution, but they have always insisted upon the rights of those driven out of Israel at partition, and their descendants, to freely return to what is now Israel – indicating clearly their fundamental refusal to recognise the permanence and legitimacy of what they call the “Jewish entity”.

Without doubt the Palestinian political project is what it has always been, the destruction of Israel. Consequently, the emergence of Israel as a kind of Spartan security state in which occupation, enormous walls and fences, and annexations, scar the land; the imprisonment or internment of young Palestinians on a very large scale, is also the inevitable consequence of Arab rejection of the right of Jews to maintain a state in the region. The Arab war against the Jews, covert and open, uncompromising, relentless, has created in Israel an armed camp, and resulted in untold misery for the Palestinians of Gaza and the West Bank.

Israel cannot make concessions concerning its security or its existence as a Jewish state. Its survival is simply non-negotiable. The only basis for lasting peace is a political settlement in which Palestinians and the surrounding Arab states accept the legitimacy of the Jewish state, and guarantee its security.

The pacifist sensibility cannot withstand contact with this reality because it is an outlook which inevitably, like it or not, involves taking against Israel in the Hamas-Israel War, without actually declaring support for Hamas. However, the demand for an immediate cessation of fighting by Israel is a demand, *ipso facto*, for the continued existence of Hamas as a political force in Gaza.

Arguments which focus upon the suffering of the civilians in the war, result in calls for the ending of the fighting without a resolution of Israeli objectives: the release of all hostages and the extirpation of Hamas from Gaza.

Whatever deals that may be struck in Egypt or elsewhere between Israel and the representatives of Hamas, the political and military struggle around the survival of Israel against those who seek its destruction will continue. It will continue without regard to the pacifist sensibility, which is only ever a cover for demands to weaken or suspend the actions Israel takes to defend its citizens and its existence as a state.