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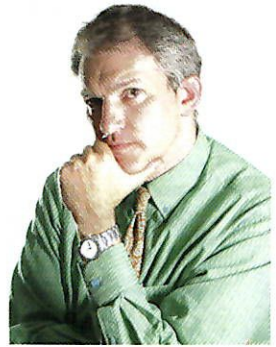
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Gaza: a counter terrorist perspective

by Philip Baum

Regardless as to the rights and wrongs of the conflict itself, only the most insensitive of individuals could fail to be touched by the images emerging from Gaza. The deaths of hundreds of innocent individuals and the plight of a traumatised population make for hard viewing. Those with an axe to grind will try to justify the need for conflict. On the Israeli side of the equation, the relentless launching of missiles from Gaza against the citizens of southern Israel and the resulting traumatising impact was justification for their "defensive offensive"; from a Hamas perspective, the stifling blockade Israel placed on Gaza justified the termination of the cease-fire agreement and a return to armed conflict. Wherever your sympathies lie, innocent people died. Such is the nature of war...

Wars have to be fought when negotiations fail. There are those who feel that there is always time for more dialogue and, in an ideal world, we would. But we do not live in a utopia and difficult strategic decisions have to be taken by brave individuals (on either side of any argument) that may result in short-term loss of lives for the long-term betterment of society and the preservation of life and common decency. The bombing of Dresden, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, that contributed to the end of World War II, were cases in point.

The international media has debated issues emanating from the Gaza conflict and some of the topics are worthy of consideration by the counter terrorist community as its strategy and responses evolve to meet future threats. What constitutes a proportional response to acts of terror is, arguably, question number one.

Terrorists succeed when they manage to vilify their enemy. It is amazing how quickly

the general public blame the authorities when mistakes are made by those whose task it is to safeguard our society; the media stirs up public opinion and conveniently forgets those who are truly responsible. In the aftermath of the 7/7 bombings in London, the Metropolitan Police accidentally shot and killed an innocent Brazilian individual whom they believed to be a terrorist. Of course it was a tragedy and an enquiry (we all learn from our mistakes) had to be launched, but there was a sense that the police officers responsible were guilty of a crime against humanity, rather than being individuals capable of making a mistake in difficult times and who, in all likelihood, are devastated by the results of their actions. We have forgotten that those who are truly responsible for Jean Charles de Menezes' death were the 7/7 bombers themselves rather than the police.

The aviation security community has to stomach incessant complaints about its procedures whilst the screeners on the front line have to withstand abuse from passengers, airport and airline personnel and the media. Many of the whinging masses have lost sight of the fact that the security services, whether they are employed by a government or private entity, are actually just trying to prevent the next terrorist atrocity. If you want to blame somebody, blame the terrorists.

Whilst I oppose racial profiling as a tactical security solution, it is an understandable phenomenon; there is going to be greater suspicion of Muslim passengers when the vast majority of recent outrages have been perpetrated by Islamic fundamentalists, especially when one considers the calibre of staff deployed at airports. Accordingly, it is the fundamentalists that should be blamed for the impact that this has had on their fellow

brethren. Instances of racism amongst our screeners must be investigated and culprits disciplined, but we must remember that it is the exceptional cases that hit the headlines.

So, where does this leave us vis-à-vis Gaza? Most of the western world regards Hamas as a terrorist organisation. That same western world bears some responsibility for bringing Hamas to power, given its push for a western-style democratic process that resulted in Hamas's election. As typical of many a terrorist organisation, Hamas has made the calculated decision that its own women and children could be sacrificed for the sake of their cause; many western observers forget that, in the same way suicide bombers become martyrs and find true tranquillity in the after-life, there is a belief that passive, unwitting martyrs killed in conflict are also destined for a better place. Consequently, whilst the moderate world views such deaths with abject horror, Hamas leaders privately revel in the losses. Why? Because it turns their enemy, in this case Israel, into the beast. Mission accomplished...

There are bound to have been individual instances of excessive, unacceptable, immoral acts perpetrated by Israeli soldiers. One would hope that the Israel Defence Force will investigate every such incident and take appropriate action against those guilty. In the same way that the Allies were disgusted by the images of abuse of power by members of the American military at Abu Ghraib, the de-humanising effects of war exist in every conflict.

There is, however, a huge difference between individual instances of crimes against humanity and state-sponsored genocide. The governments of the United States, the United Kingdom and their allies, take no pleasure in the civilian death toll in Iraq; the Israeli government neither relishes nor gains from the deaths of Palestinian children. They are not in the

business of ethnic cleansing à la Nazi party, Sadaam Hussein or the actions of all too many African regimes.

Hamas is the real culprit behind the tragedy of the Palestinian people. The construction of the separation fence between Israel and the Palestinian territories, that has divided many Palestinian communities, was the result of suicide bombings against civilian targets; it has been a successful defensive tool. The instigation of the blockade of Gaza was brought about by the smuggling of arms and rockets. The perceived excessive checks to which Palestinians have been subjected to at checkpoints on the border, often delaying people requiring urgent medical treatment from reaching hospitals, is as a result of the use of ambulances to smuggle arms into the territories and suicide bombers out. The recent targeting of schools and medical facilities in Gaza is as a result of Hamas electing to fire its rockets from such locations. Hizbollah did likewise in Lebanon.

My stance is one of being anti-terrorist rather than anti-Palestinian. I hope and pray that diplomacy will quickly bring about a two state solution; the Palestinian people need a homeland that can provide its people with security and a sense of pride. Israel is by no

means immune from guilt. The continued construction of settlements in the West Bank is an abomination and does little to convince their opponents that a territorial deal is a possibility. The exact line along which the security fence was constructed has brought about unnecessary communal punishment. And, the failure of Israeli governments, and other States, to invest in the infrastructure of Gaza and the West Bank is, in my opinion, a gross miscalculation that has fuelled the ranks of Hamas. Gaza is a place where "hope" is a word in a dictionary.

That said, most Israelis see no benefit in conflict, no desire to have their troops lives at risk in a region over which they have no designs, and would welcome the pre-Intifada prosperity that they enjoyed. The recent Gaza campaign may well have resulted in another generation of traumatised Palestinians abhorring the Israeli nation and its military juggernaut, yet equally history has shown us that the best peace deals have been borne out of excessive bloodshed.


Some readers may feel that the situation in Gaza has little to do with aviation security. I beg to differ. There are many that feel that the best way to combat terrorism is to deal with the root causes. True, that is a task for the

politicians and how one brings about a resolution to a centuries-old conflict is beyond them, so I'm not even going to begin trying here. Our community must, therefore, react to the circumstances in which it finds itself.

The Gaza conflict could well be used as a cause of justifying the continued attack on western values. American support for the state of Israel, and even that of other western governments, may put it and its assets in the crosshairs of al-Qaeda-style militants once again. The dramatic rise of anti-Semitic incidents in France and the United Kingdom in recent weeks indicates just how certain individuals and groups can manipulate conflicts to support their own objectives. Those who orchestrate terrorists atrocities may feel that, with Israeli support weakened amongst the general public in the USA and Europe, now would be a good time to get them to further question their governments' standpoint...especially now that there is a new President in the White House.

The aviation security community must remain resolute. We will not always be popular, civil liberties may be encroached upon and innocent passengers and crew may feel targeted. But, the fault is not ours and the campaign must be fought.


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