

The more things change, the more they remain the same. Especially in the Middle East. I wrote this article 15 years ago, after I came back from 3 weeks of volunteer work at an Israeli army base. 15 years have passed and it might have been written last week. The children who were born that year will be going in the army in 3 years. They will be facing the same enemies, trying to solve the same problems, confronting the same hostile and unfair world. And what of their children? Will anything change for them?

Israel's past is its present. Its present is probably the future of generations to come. The more things change....

I SPENT 3 WEEKS ON AN ARMY BASE - PART 5

I discussed Israel's problems with many Israelis during the three weeks I spent there. It didn't really surprise me that most Israelis are just as disgusted and fed up as Americans are with what is happening in both countries: the corruption scandals that seem to be revealed daily, with governmental stupidity and indecisiveness, with the waste of money on unnecessary and ill-considered projects, and, of course, with the helplessness of the authorities to handle the increasing violence by criminals in the U.S., and by Gaza Arabs in Israel.

The Gaza Strip, in polite terms, is an abscess on the body of Israel. Not so politely, but probably more accurately, it is a pussy pimple on Israel's behind. A dirty, crowded, muddy in winter and dusty in summer, depressing, tiny piece of territory. It is inhabited by several hundred thousand frustrated Arabs without a future. Prior to 1967 Gaza was occupied by Egypt who ruled it with an iron hand - there was a closely enforced curfew, Gazans were not allowed to freely emigrate to Egypt or any other Arab state, and all expressions of discontent or protest were swiftly and terribly punished by the Egyptian military governor whose exile to Gaza was, more than likely, was a punishment for having angered his superiors.

In 1967, during the 6-Day War, Gaza was occupied by Israel. The eventual Camp David peace accords returned every square inch of the Sinai desert to Egypt. Even the tiny strip of beach at Sharm El Sheikh where the Israelis had built a luxury hotel was demanded and eventually regained by the Egyptians, but somehow there was never a request for the return of Gaza. It was a fact recognized by all parties,

albeit one never mentioned in public, that Egypt did not want the Gaza Strip and its problems. Unfortunately, Israel was not wise enough to adopt a similar attitude.

And so, Israel remained in Gaza, the town no Arab government would touch. During the subsequent 25 years of Israeli rule the standard of living of Gaza Arabs rose to be one of the highest in the Middle East. Infant mortality declined. Life expectancy increased dramatically. Running water and electricity were supplied to the wretched shacks in the refugee camps, travel to Arab countries and elsewhere was easily done, and relatively well-paid jobs were made available in Israel.

Israel spent millions each year on maintaining and improving conditions in Gaza. It had even attempted to build new modern housing to replace the hovels in refugee camps; only the unexpected opposition of Arab governments in the U.N. and elsewhere prevented this major capital outlay of scarce dollars.

For the last several years, of course, Gaza has been in the forefront of the intifada: Israelis who venture into the area are routinely attacked and murdered, public order is non-existent, moderate Arabs are brutally killed by the more radical ones, and Gazans who go to work in Israel are apt to turn violent and attack the closest Israeli civilians.

Several years ago, at a high level meeting with influential Israeli political figures I posed the question that is currently being raised more often and more loudly at the highest levels of the Israeli government, including quite recently one of the Cabinet ministers: why not give Gaza back to whoever may want it - Arab governments, the PLO, the U.N. - and abandon it to its own devices?

At the time my suggestion was perceived as outlandish, even though the most logical argument that could be mustered against it was that the abandonment of Gaza would send a signal to the Arabs in the West Bank that Israel could be forced to withdraw by protests and civil disobedience, and that this would result in serious problems in those territories.

I believe that under today's conditions this is a price that Israel should be willing to pay in order to rid itself of an infection that saps Israel's strength. It is quite certain that Israel's withdrawal would result in civil strife, inter-Arab slaughter, economic dislocation and all the other ills that plague Arab governments throughout the Middle

East, but, frankly, is the continued welfare of Gaza's Arab really Israel's problem? I think not.

Israel's concern should be confined to the security of the Jewish state and its citizens. Gaza Strip should not be allowed to become a base for attacks on Israel and its people, and an unequivocal and straight forward statement of immediate Israeli withdrawal from Gaza and a warning to whomever would end up in control in this forsaken hell-hole should be made through the United Nations or some other appropriate forum: any effort to create an armed force, to bring in weapons, to engage in hostile actions of any kind would bring about an Israeli reaction, in overwhelming force.

In the meantime, Israel should be quite willing to stay on the sidelines and watch the PLO, Hamas, Hezbollah, Egypt, Jordan, Iran, Iraq and all the rest fight one another, kill one another, and in general behave the way the Middle Eastern population has been behaving for the last century or so.