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"I was one of those foreigners who progressively fell out of love with Israel."

The paradox of Israel's pursuit of might: Forty years ago, I was enraptured by Israel's courageous sense of mission. For me today, as for many, that idealism has palled

Max Hastings, *The Guardian*, Saturday 9 May 2009

When I was offered the opportunity, and the privilege, to give these Leonard Stein lectures, I thought a good bit about what I might usefully talk about. I am fascinated by the region, which I first visited 40 years ago. But I should emphasise at the outset that I can make no claim to specialist knowledge. I speak neither Hebrew nor Arabic. My own expertise is military. Therefore, since wars and rumours of war play a dominant part in the modern history of the region, I am chiefly going to address strategic issues. I want to consider what all those concerned - Israeli, Arab and indeed American, may have learned about the utility, or inutility, of force in achieving their political objectives. Afghanistan is not part of the Middle East, but western engagement there has obviously become a critical part of the jigsaw of relationships with the Muslim world. In my second lecture next week, I shall discuss recent western experience in Afghanistan and Iraq. But I want to start tonight by talking about Israel, and to say something about how my own relationship with the country, and especially with its army, has changed over 40 years.

I first visited Israel in 1969. It was a time when much of the western world was still passionately enthused about the country's triumph in the six-day war. A host of people were thrilled by the brilliance of Israel's military achievement, the image of an exulting Israeli soldier depicted on the cover of Life magazine bathing in the Suez Canal. President Nasser had for years promised to sweep the Israelis into the sea. Much of the world believed that the Soviet armoury provided to Egypt and Syria might enable him to do it. Instead, the tiny Jewish state, less than 20 years old, had engaged the armies of three Arab nations, and crushingly defeated them all. The Arab air forces were destroyed within hours, mostly on the ground. The Israelis successively smashed through Nasser's divisions on the western front, scaled and

seized the Golan Heights, and snatched east Jerusalem and the West Bank in the face of Hussein's highly capable Jordanian army. Sinai was left strewn with the boots of fleeing Egyptians. The Israeli victory was an awesome display of command boldness, operational competence and human endeavour.

In the first years that followed, there was a euphoria in Israel, which many visitors shared. We watched Jews from all over the world gathering to pray at the Wailing Wall for the first time in almost 2000 years; Israelis of all ages revelling in the sensation of

being able to work the kibbutzim of the north free from arbitrary Syrian shells. They basked in their freedom to drive from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem without running the gauntlet of Jordanian or Palestinian gunfire. From inhabiting one of the most claustrophobic places in the world, suddenly they found themselves free to walk the hills of Judea and Samaria, to roam miles across Sinai on a weekend. The soldiers of the Israeli army, careerists, conscripts and reservists alike, walked 10ft tall. In those six days of June 1967, they had shown themselves one of the greatest fighting forces of history, expunging almost at a stroke the memory of Jewish impotence in the face of centuries of persecution, of six million being herded helpless into cattle trucks for the death camps.

During my own early visits to Israel, I became friendly with Michael and Joan Comay, the sort of charming, witty, liberal sophisticates - born in South Africa but living in Israel since 1946 - whom Europeans immediately identified with. Michael served as a popular Israeli ambassador in London. Joan was the author of a well-known guide book to her country, which she presented me with a copy of. She wrote lyrically about how 'a new and exciting dimension had been added to a visit to Israel' by the 1967 triumph. I quote: 'The

Mandelbaum Gate had vanished, together with the barbed wire of no man's land, and the Old City of Jerusalem was now just a few minutes away from the centre of the modern town. Bethlehem, Jericho, Nablus, Hebron and Gaza were no longer across enemy frontiers, but included in daily bus tours. On the Golan Heights one could drive through mile after mile of captured Syrian minefields and pillboxes and look down on the Israeli villages below that had laid open to their gunfire. A plane excursion trip or a drive took visitors across the battlefields in the Sinai desert to the jagged purple mountains of southern Sinai and the startlingly blue water of Sharm el Sheikh. Whatever the political future might be, Israel no longer felt tiny and hemmed in. In greater numbers than ever before, visitors thronged to see the historic sites and modern renaissance in the Land of the Bible'.

Very little was said in those days about Palestine's other people - those whom the world knows as the Palestinians. They were both the losers and losers. Israelis had a popular saying: 'Arabs have many countries and we have only one. Let them care for their own'. An American journalist named Frank Gervasi published a book after the six-day war entitled *The Case For Israel*, which boasted an applauding foreword by Israel's foreign minister Abba Eban. Gervasi wrote: 'Peace is still elusive and distant, but Israel was never more sure of itself, never more secure. Should the Arabs succeed in mounting another jihad, the fighting would start right where they live, for the Israelis now have strategic depth. Although they still hope to distil from their victory a peace negotiated directly with their Arab neighbours, they are fully prepared to accept the possible, even probable alternative - the present status quo. Israelis are well aware that a bad peace would be even worse than war, hence are not likely to give way to pressures from the great powers. The Israelis never made war except for peace, but if they could not have peace they were confident in their capacity for containing any future Arab aggression'.

Through the years that followed, I visited Israel many times. I gazed across the Suez Canal during the artillery bombardments of the 1970 so-called war of attrition with Egypt. I was a correspondent there in October 1973, during the Yom Kippur war. Like the rest of the world, I marvelled at the manner in which the Israeli army recovered itself after the stunning shock of the Arab assault on two fronts, to stage one of the most dramatic counter-offensives in the history of war. It was an extraordinarily moving spectacle, to behold the people of Israel, spiritually a village at war in which everyone knew everyone else, rallying to meet what they perceived as a threat to their national survival. One morning I stood on the

Golan Heights and watched through binoculars Israeli tanks duelling with the Syrians, amid great pillars of smoke and flame from scores of blazing vehicles. I did not then know that the handful of Centurions of the Barak Brigade represented the sole surviving Israeli armoured force, which narrowly frustrated the breakthrough of overwhelmingly superior numbers of Arab T-62s. A few nights later I bivouacked in the Sinai passes, talking for hours under the stars, amid distant artillery fire, to Israeli reservists about their hopes and fears. With a colleague from the Financial Times, having thinly disguised ourselves as Israeli soldiers, we made an illicit night crossing of the Suez canal, to report Ariel Sharon's stunning encirclement operation which trapped the Egyptian army on the east bank. In those days I loved those people, and boundlessly admired their achievement. I wrote in one of my less temperate dispatches, expressing faith in Israel as a bastion of western civilization in the Middle East: 'These last three weeks, I am proud to have shared the Israelis' camp fires in Sinai. They are a very great people who three weeks ago came closer to destruction than blind Europe seems willing to recognise'.

After I came home from the Yom Kippur War, to some notoriety and controversy for the emotionalism of my dispatches, I received a note from James Cameron, one of the most admired journalists of his generation, not least by me. Jimmy, a longstanding Zionist, wrote warmly about my reporting. He said: 'It is impossible to work in combat with the Israeli army without this response, if you have any sense of history and drama'. But then he added: 'I have sometimes wondered over the fast few years whether this irresistible military mesmerism hasn't clouded for us some of the political falsities. I just don't know. I think I was marginally led up the garden in 1967'. Jimmy's tentative note roused the first stirrings in my mind of ideas which evolved only slowly in the years which followed. Remember- I was still in my 20s, and as Chesterton wrote 'I will neither seek to excuse nor to deny the immortal crime of being young'. I had always loved soldiers. I was enthused by the romance of the battlefield. I possessed an exaggerated respect for military prowess.

Ironically, it was the experience of spending much more time with the Israeli army in the mid-1970s, in the course of researching a bad book about one of its heroes, which caused me to begin to perceive the importance of what James Cameron said. I glimpsed a darker side of Israel, to which I had hitherto been blind. I learned a lot about the ruthlessness of Israeli antiterrorist operations against the Palestinians. I spent many hours talking to thoughtful Israelis, who voiced their fears about the perils, the threatened corruption of

their own society, which they perceived in the 1967 conquests. I also became dismayed by the naked imperialism displayed by Israel's right-wing zealots. One night at a dinner party in Jerusalem in 1977, I heard a young Israeli talking about the Arabs in terms which chilled my blood. 'In the next war', he said, 'we've got to get the Palestinians out of the West Bank for good'.

To me, in my immaturity and naivete, Israel's struggle had hitherto seemed that of a brilliant little people, who had suffered the most ghastly experience of the 20th century, struggling for survival amid a hostile Middle East still bent upon their destruction. Now, suddenly, I found myself meeting Israelis committed to the creation of a greater Israel embracing the West Bank, who were utterly heedless of the fate of its inhabitants. They regarded the Palestinians as a mere embarrassing impediment to the fulfilment of Israel's historic territorial destiny. By a curious quirk, that young Israeli whom I heard enthuse about emptying the West Bank of Arabs was Binyamin Netanyahu, who is today his country's prime minister. Whatever his public equivocations today, I doubt that his private views have much changed. Listening to Israelis such as himself speaking of the Palestinians thirty years ago, I felt a chilling sense that they were using the language of another place and time: they seemed to regard their Arab neighbours much as 19th century Americans regarded their native compatriots, the so-called Red Indians: a mere inconvenience to their own purposes, to be thrust aside by whatever means seemed necessary. I began to understand what a cleverer and more thoughtful young man than myself might have seen from the outset: the huge danger implicit in rooting a society's polity in its military prowess and powers of conquest.

When I said something of the kind to a politician of the Israeli right, he responded contemptuously: 'You are a typical European. You loved Israel when it was a victim. Now you turn your face from us, because we have become too strong for your taste. We are no longer Jews on our knees, begging for pity'. I had lunch one day in Jerusalem in 1979 with that brilliant Israeli novelist and peacenik Amos Oz, who said something of the same kind, but from a different perspective: 'People like you', he said to me, 'are going to become very disappointed in Israel in the years ahead. You want it to behave like a European society. Instead, it is becoming a Middle Eastern society. I hope that it will not behave worse than other Middle Eastern societies. But you should not delude yourself that it is likely to behave much better'.

This, it seemed to me then and still seems to me now, was a profound observation about what was happening to Israel, and has since shaped its character and behaviour. The generation of Israelis

whom I met, and enthusiastically embraced, in the late 1960s and early 1970s were overwhelmingly formed by the diaspora from which they came. In the decades since, as they have died, their society has instead become dominated by those forged by different experiences- either of whole lifetimes in the fevered hothouse of Israel, or by immigration from Russia, whence so many newcomers have arrived in recent times.

A majority of Russian immigrants have become supporters of Israel's political right. Their vision reflects a faith in the efficacy of force characteristic of the society from which they have come. Three years ago in Jerusalem, I met a very bright and energetic couple in their late 40s, who had emigrated from Russia a decade earlier. Both held responsible managerial jobs, as they had back in the country of their birth. When we began to speak of the Palestinians and terrorism, the husband said: 'In my Russian village in my father's time in 1920, there was trouble with White guerrillas. Budenny's Cossacks came. They burnt the village from which the guerrillas came. The guerrillas returned twice more. The Cossacks burned two more villages. Then there was no more trouble with guerrillas'. This was the culture from which these two highly-educated and in many ways impressive Israelis came. They asserted that the Budenny method was the only proper one by which to address Hamas, Hizbollah and Fatah in the 21st Century.

The policies of recent Israeli governments suggest that their view is widely shared. To those foreigners who assert that repression, coupled with the relentless expansion of Jewish settlements on the West Bank, have cost Israel enormous international support, such people answer: 'what is 'international support' worth? Where is 'international support' when Iran's president threatens Israel with extinction? Which of the countries which criticise the actions of Israel help to prevent the Arabs from gaining WMD, to stop Hamas committing acts of terrorism, to check an Arab invasion, to prevent Iran from building a bomb?'. These Israelis, and there are many of them, tell every opinion pollster that they desire peace, and are unquestionably sincere. Yet most are still viscerally unwilling to consider the territorial sacrifices - which must be infinitely more far-reaching than mere withdrawal from Gaza- and the sea-change of attitudes indispensable to advancing its cause. They believe that the history of the Jewish experience shows that strength is the supreme virtue; that most Arabs are not only ill-intentioned but weak, and deserving of their contempt.

Between the late 1970s and 1990s, I was one of those foreigners who progressively fell out of love with Israel. I became increasingly persuaded that the arrogance of its faith in its own military power

had induced its people to go far beyond a belief in defending their own society, to support a polity committed to perpetuating a great historic injustice against the Palestinians. Michael Howard observed recently that Israel has implicitly, if not explicitly, committed itself to acceptance of a permanent state of war. Whatever government is in power in Jerusalem, there is a belief that peace with the Muslim world is unattainable; and thus that Israel must resign itself to a future dependent on its military capability rather than on meaningful negotiation and radical concessions. Associated with this is a belief that Jewish colonisation of the West Bank is a price the Palestinians must expect to pay for their refusal to make peace; and for the Arabs' unsuccessful gambles on resort to war to attain their ends since 1948. The Arabs, the hawks say, have repeatedly chosen to seek the arbitration of the battlefield for their aspirations. They must suffer the consequences of this choice. I do not believe that many Israelis in their hearts share the hope which Bibi Netanyahu expressed in my hearing 30 years ago- that the entire Palestinian population can be wished out of the West Bank. But most Israelis believe that Arab intransigence as much as Jewish history morally justifies their right to occupy large swathes of Palestinian territory including some of the most sacred, and to exercise hegemony over the remainder, through strategic roads and outposts, on such terms as Israeli governments see fit to impose. Ehud Olmert said to me in 2005: 'Why does the world always talk of Israel's mistakes? Why not of the Arab world's mistakes? We will never go back to the 1967 borders'. There has always seemed a naivete about the widespread belief in the West, that if the Oslo Accords had been fulfilled, or if some similar future agreement can be implemented on the same basis, a two-state solution will become feasible. Is it really credible that a Palestinian state can become economically, politically and socially viable which is composed of two separated enclaves, in Gaza and on the West Bank? And wherein Israel retains strategic roads and settlements? Prime minister Netanyahu is today explicitly committed to cantonisation of the West Bank. The world is already overcrowded with societies to which the international community has rashly accorded recognition of nationhood, but which are inherently unviable, and thus doomed to stumble onward as failing or failed states, with all the lawlessness and misery such a condition implies. Thus far, and thus far only, the Israeli right has a pragmatic point: unless the Palestinians can be provided with a more credible territorial basis for a state, it is difficult to believe that this will ever work within the framework of existing frontiers in Gaza and the West Bank, even in a more benign security climate

and with the demolition of some Jewish settlements.

Yet, if economic and political viability would be elusive even for a Palestinian state based on the Oslo Accords, it becomes unimaginable in the face of systematic Israeli destruction of Palestinian infrastructure. The most extraordinary, indeed nihilistic aspect of Israeli military policy towards the Palestinians over the past 15 years and more is that it has been based upon punishing terrorism by deliberately wrecking the economic base of Palestinian society. On its own terms, it has succeeded. There was little enough meaningful economic activity in Palestinian territory before the intifadas. But today the only thriving industries are human reproduction, terrorism, and the propagation of grievances. Three years ago, I spent some time interviewing Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank. The conditions in which the inhabitants of Gaza live are, to us, almost unimaginable. Few have work. Most live in breezeblock barracks. From one year's end to the next they see nothing that is aesthetically beautiful except the sea and sky. Almost all, even the most educated, speak in the language of emotion and unreason, especially when addressing a foreigner. What else could be expected from people mired in despair? They have no useful occupations and no hope. They inhabit a void, in which they are supplied only with the bare means for life.

Hatred for their oppressors has become the only functioning engine of their society. One man whom I met in Gaza said: 'This is the biggest prison camp in the world, with 1.2 million inmates. I am 31 and have never even visited Jerusalem'. A woman vented her animus towards the Americans: 'They treat us in one way and Israelis in another. We see their double standards here and in Afghanistan and in Iraq and in Pakistan'. People who have nothing have nothing to lose. It seems extraordinary that a nation as educated and sophisticated as Israel could for a moment have convinced itself that it can forge a credible, never mind honourable, future by battering the Palestinians into submission to its will, and even more remarkable that successive US administrations have indulged such a view.

The policies of modern Israel have created the certainty of new generations of neighbours committed to its undoing. Its military superiority has become a curse, because - backed by the might of the US - this has rendered it apparently unnecessary to make the concessions which alone might offer a possibility of lasting accommodation. The Palestinians' only influence rests upon the power of such weapons as they can obtain, and upon their destructive capacity to broadcast terrorism. Who can be surprised that the people of Gaza elected a Hamas government, when the only

culture they possess is that of violence, either as perpetrator or victim? It seems facile for Israel to seek to hug moral high ground in the matter of terrorism. First, the Jewish state was itself born out of terrorism. Two of its prime ministers were prominent members of the terrorist factions which bombed the British out of Palestine. Second, it is a reality of modern times that no sane society engages an overwhelmingly militarily superior nation on the battlefield on terms which suit the possessor of power. Almost every strategist in the world accepts that asymmetric warfare will remain a commonplace of the 21st century. There is no purpose in wasting rhetoric upon moral denunciations of terrorism or even suicide-bombing. The Palestinians, together with the Muslim world and many citizens of the western democracies, no longer believe that Israel will grant justice to their people by negotiation; they believe that only force might eventually drive the Israelis to make concessions. Unless or until that perception changes, Palestinians and their Arab sponsors will continue to seek to injure Israel by whatever violent means seem open to them.

There is a question which Israelis often ask, in the face of assertions such as the above: 'Suppose we withdrew from the Golan, East Jerusalem, and the whole West Bank. Do you honestly believe that the Arab states would then make and keep peace?' The likely answer is that most, if not all Arab governments would respond with recognition of Israel's right to exist, for which they indicated their willingness at the 2002 Beirut summit. But a substantial popular minority would remain implacable. Muslim hostility towards Israel, and indeed towards the West, is driven by unassuageable cultural and economic jealousies and resentments, for which the Jewish state merely serves as a proximate and visible focus. Many militant Muslims recognise, privately at least, that they cannot aspire to inflict strategic defeat on the western democracies. However, they cling to a hope that they might at least achieve the lesser objective, of extinguishing Israel on their doorsteps.

Because the security threat to Israel seems sure to persist, one significant issue on which I differ from many of Israel's critics is about the security wall which it has created around the West Bank. This seems a valid and prudent - if painfully ugly - response to the terrorist threat. What is pernicious about the wall is its siting. It is unacceptable to a great many people around the world, that the Israelis have unilaterally imposed a line for such a fortification which annexes substantial areas of Palestinian territory. An Israeli right-winger said to me: 'the land inside the security wall represents the maximum area Israel would try to keep in any final settlement'. But then he added a throwaway line: 'except in the Jordan valley, of course, where

there are no Palestinians'. To define with such cynicism, ruthlessness and obtrusively intended permanence a border which Israel sets to suit itself flaunts the nation's indifference to world opinion and to justice.

And even if we acknowledge that Israel will continue to face an existential threat for many years to come, whatever policies it adopts, this does not dispel another reality at least as important: if Israel declines to offer some sort of accommodation with the Palestinians founded upon withdrawal from almost all the territories occupied in 1967, it must perpetuate denial of even a remote hope of peaceful coexistence with the Muslim world, and threaten itself with pariah status elsewhere. Many Israelis cling to a dim, irrational hope that patience and periodic punitive assaults will suffice to cause the Arab citizens of Israel and their Palestinian neighbours eventually to render their submission. There is some evidence in modern history that wholly ruthless repressive policies can be effective. The Nazis were more successful than we sometimes care to accept, in maintaining the subjection of occupied Europe and the Balkans during second world war. But Israeli policy, most recently implemented in Gaza, achieves the worst of all possible worlds. The Israeli army kills sufficient innocents to fuel Muslim hatred and earn the condemnation of international opinion, while being constrained - mercifully - from acting with the unqualified savagery which is sometimes effective. Moderate repression never works.

It was an irony of the 9/11 attacks on the United States, that they caused both Palestinians and many Israelis to celebrate - the former openly, the latter privately. The Palestinians foolishly failed to perceive that the Twin Towers attacks were a disaster for them. If Israel has rather fewer friends in the US than conspiracists sometimes suppose, Arabs in 2001 already had very few indeed. Thereafter, 9/11 caused most Americans to fix in their minds a view of Muslims as enemies. They became more ready than ever before to see the Israelis as comrades in what President Bush foolishly proclaimed as a 'war on terror'. From the outset, the Israeli right understood the significance and political value to themselves of this.

Eight years on, however, the picture looks somewhat different. Experience in Iraq and Afghanistan is pushing the US towards a much more cautious view about the utility of force in confronting its enemies abroad. Many Americans, especially soldiers and counter-terrorist specialists, have learned big and important lessons about the limitations of overwhelming military power in confronting relatively primitive enemies on their own turf. They acknowledge that the concept of a 'war on terror' is inherently ridiculous, as Michael Howard and other strategic thinkers have

emphasised for the past eight years. Terrorism is a method, not an enemy. It was folly for American foreign policy implicitly or explicitly to appear to couple itself unconditionally to the cause of the Russians seeking to crush Chechnya's dissidents - and to that of the Israelis, attempting to batter the Palestinians into submission. The Arabs are still desperately short of friends in the US. There is little likelihood that the Obama Administration will radically modify America's relationship with Israel. It is sobering to note the withdrawal of Barack Obama's nominee to head his National Intelligence Council, Charles Freeman. He ran into overwhelming domestic political opposition not least because he has asserted that 'Israeli violence against the Palestinians' is the key barrier to Middle East peace.

But the American appetite for a crusade in the Middle East, the nonsense of the neocon mantra about Middle East peace 'the road to Jerusalem lies through Baghdad' has been exposed. There is a growing understanding in Washington that association with the excesses of Israeli policy is a serious impediment to America's pursuit of its other worldwide interests. George Bush chose to regard Israel as a valuable strategic associate. Present and future US administrations are more likely to regard it as an embarrassing, if nonetheless inescapable, liability. In Obama's Washington, there seems today a more realistic understanding of the limits of military power than is apparent in Jerusalem.

Few sensible people dispute Israel's need to maintain a strong security posture in the face of an existential military threat, even if a conventional attack by the country's Arab neighbours is implausible. To put the matter another way: much as some Arab states might like to reverse by force the verdicts of 1948, 1956, 1967 and 1973, they know they cannot aspire to do this. Israeli military power provides a highly effective deterrent. No responsible government in Jerusalem can deny itself the capability to counter a possible threat from Iran, for as long as that country remains committed to the destruction of Israel. It can convincingly be argued that Iranian regional ambitions pose a greater threat to its Arab neighbours than to Israel. But Israeli fears about a nuclear-armed Iran will continue to merit the utmost sympathy, unless or until the Iranians renounce their avowed annihilatory ambitions.

But here we are talking about high-end measures to protect against contingencies that remain low-probability. Among the collateral damage inflicted by Iranian posturing is that it is exploited by the Israeli right to justify continuing excesses against the Palestinians. The hysterical threats made by Iran make it even more difficult to mobilise a consensus in Israel for concessions towards achieving a modus vivendi with the Arab world.

Iranian support for Hizbollah injures the Palestinian cause. It helps Israel's hawks and expansionists to brush aside Arab advances. Yet Israel suffers the same frustration on a regional scale as that which afflicts the US globally: the difficulty - some of us would argue impossibility - of leveraging overwhelming military power to make its will prevail upon the Palestinians. The Palestinians are incapable of imposing their will on the Israelis. But poverty, misery and impotence represent weapons of their own. These things cause Israel to be regarded by a large part of the world as an oppressor whose claims on international respect derive only from its military power and status as America's foremost overseas client.

I often think that Israelis focus too much upon their past, not enough or at least not imaginatively enough upon their future. In the days when I visited Israel regularly, long dinner-table arguments about the nation's strategy became familiar. There would often come a moment when somebody would blurt out- justifying this or that aspect of Israeli policy: 'But you've got to understand why we must do this- because of the Holocaust'. For more than 60 years, the Holocaust card has been played again and again. But a time is approaching, as generations change, when the familiar ritual of taking every distinguished visitor to Israel first to the Holocaust museum and memorial will seem inappropriate. The Holocaust memory has since 1948 carried enormous weight in the United States and Europe, although much less elsewhere. Today in Europe, there is not the slightest danger that the unspeakable fate of the Jews in the 1940s will be forgotten. But many people, especially the young, no longer perceive the crimes of Hitler, however monstrous, as providing remotely adequate justification for - for instance - Israeli military excesses in Gaza, or systematic Israeli exploitation of scarce water resources at the expense of the West Bank Palestinians.

The Holocaust argument is sometimes displaced by another, even more facile jibe: that those who criticise Israel's conduct are guilty of anti-semitism. I have been accused of this myself. Yet I take comfort from the number of Jews who express repugnance about Israel's excesses. Avi Shlaim has dissected the failures and deceptions of modern Israeli policy far more convincingly than I could ever do. Rabbi David Goldberg has written impressively and convincingly in his history of Zionism about Israel's failure to create a plausible successor vision to that of the old Zionists. 'Zionism's most important achievement', he says, 'was to provide a haven for the escapees and survivors of Hitler's Holocaust'. Today, by contrast, one of the foremost realities of Israel is that few western Jews want to live there. The Zionist claim,

that the country is the natural home of Jews, is rejected by a majority of the world's 14 million Jews. Goldberg argues that - and again I quote - 'the Jews remain essentially a Diaspora people, as they have been since the sixth century BC. Zionists claim that only in their own land can Jews lead a full, 'normal' life without fear of antisemitism. But the irony of Israel's geopolitical situation is that the average Jew walking the streets of Los Angeles, Golders Green or even Moscow is physically safer than the average Israeli walking in Jerusalem or Tel Aviv. Nor has Zionism's ambition, of turning Israel into the cultural lodestar of Jewry, radiating its light from the centre to the periphery, been realized'.

I still believe passionately in the Jewish genius, whether displayed within or without the Jewish state. But it seems safe to say that many Jews of the Diaspora, as well as non-Jews in the world, no longer believe that the Zionist concept of entitlement, based first upon Biblical history, and latterly upon the monumental grievance of the Holocaust, suffices to justify perpetuating historic injustice upon the Arabs of Palestine. Benny Morris's excellent recent history of the events of 1948 shows that even a respected Israeli historian is today ready to acknowledge the scale both of ruthless Israeli ethnic cleansing at the time, and of the deceptions employed since to conceal from the world what took place. The Israeli myth, that the Palestinians displaced in 1948 voluntarily abandoned their homes and property, is unsustainable in the face of such evidence.

An Israeli listening to all this might interrupt angrily: 'But why do you say so little about Hamas and Hizbollah, rocketing and suicide-bombing innocent Israeli civilians?'. Yes, indeed - such acts must always be condemned. But what of proportionality? In recent years, for every Israeli killed by terrorism, the Israeli security forces have killed 30, 40, 50 Palestinians - some of these combatants, to be sure, but most civilians. Britain has sometimes been accused of heavy-handed action in Ireland during the struggle with the IRA. But, although the IRA was responsible for far more killings than Palestinian terrorism has contrived in Israel, never for a moment did it seem acceptable to exact retribution on the massive scale Israel has adopted. It is true that Hamas and Hizbollah seek to exploit international sentiment by using tactics that make some 'collateral damage', deaths of civilians, inevitable. But the record shows that Israel exacts a blood price from the innocent of a severity which only tyrannies have historically thought appropriate.

Beyond killings, in counter-insurgency situations all over the world, I have often thought that security forces underrate damage done by lesser routine humiliations, nuisances, insults. This was the case when US vehicle columns on

monsoonswamped roads in Vietnam deluged walking farmers with mud, when low-flying British Chinooks every hour or two whip up duststorms and stampede livestock in Afghan towns, or when Israeli roadblocks casually and arguably systemically abuse Palestinians. I remember myself coming out of Gaza three years ago, and being held in the otherwise empty Erez border control cage for an hour. This was to enable the Israeli soldiers manning it to show their scorn for western journalists who reveal sympathy for the Palestinians by visiting them in their wretched zoo. It was a hot day, and I said to the Israelis through the bars: 'Its not the end of the world for me to get back to Jerusalem an hour late, but it makes you people seem a little small-minded'. The officer in command shrugged to the guards: 'Leave them there a while'. When we were eventually released, my Palestinian woman interpreter was strip-searched, to drive home the point. How could she and her kind not hate the Israelis? And of course, both in Gaza and on the West Bank there are many narratives of vastly more serious intrusions, insults, assaults and wanton acts of destruction.

Far from the IDF pursuing any policy of hearts and minds, the entire thrust of Israeli policy towards the Palestinians in recent times has been to convey a crude message of overwhelming power, of Israel's ability to command, kill or destroy at will, without fear of disciplinary sanctions for excess. The Israeli army, which once exemplified much that was best about Israel, has today been corrupted by the long experience of suppressing insurgency. Morally, if not militarily, it is a shadow of the force which fought in 1948, 1956, 1967, 1973.

To many Israelis who came to Palestine from Europe in the late 1940s, the lesson of the Holocaust was that never again must Jews be so weak that they could be herded passively into cattle trucks for the death camps. So effectively did they promote the ideals of Jewish strength and military prowess that, within a few short years, the Israeli people proved themselves one of the most formidable fighting forces the world has ever seen. The IDF became the defining institution of Israeli society. As a young man, and not even myself a Jew, I not only formed a passionate admiration for some of its men as individuals, but I also fell victim to an extravagant enthusiasm for its culture and achievements, as James Cameron suggested back in 1973. Israel has been right to judge that its survival rested upon its military capability for self-defence. But it has been wrong to extrapolate a belief that the nation's entire polity can rest upon its ability to fight a way to a future - what Avi Shlaim has called the policy of the Iron Wall. Justice to Israel's polity demands acknowledgement that some of the most piercing criticism of government policies always come from

within Israel itself. It is a reflection of the society's passionate commitment to open debate that opponents, especially of national security policy, speak out with a freedom wholly unknown elsewhere in the Middle East. It is to the credit of some of Israel's soldiers, that evidence of excesses in - for instance - the recent assault on Gaza has been provided from within the IDF itself. Yet for all the vigour of the domestic argument, the ultimate realities seem inescapable: under governments of all complexions, settlement expansion on the West Bank has continued. It has proved impossible to achieve and sustain a political consensus for helping the Palestinians to create the sort of viable society which might alone offer a possibility of eventual accommodation.

Lawrence Freedman concluded his recent history of America's relationship with the Middle East since the 1970s, *A Choice of Enemies*, by arguing that the problems are far too deep-rooted and far-reaching to be resolved by any single grand move or design. This is surely so. There is no 'solution'. There is no instant initiative available to President Obama, nor for that matter prime minister Netanyahu. All that is realistically possible is a long series of small incremental steps, which might over time massage the issues at stake into less hopeless intractability. The situation must be managed and ameliorated, rather than resolved.

But the first step must surely be a recognition by Israel, assisted by vastly stronger pressure than any modern US Administration has shown itself willing to exercise, that the Palestinians not only should not, but cannot, be bombarded into acquiescence in the expansion of Israel's 1948 frontiers. The most dangerous reality for Israel is that a large part of the world, for which the historic memory of the Holocaust possesses diminishing significance, perceives a legitimacy in Palestinian terrorism, as long as Israel seems bent on refusing them justice. This is the same legitimacy, one might add, which American supporters of the Zionist cause conferred on Jewish terrorism against the British in the years of the Palestine Mandate. Hamas and Hizbollah embrace murderous means and are committed to intolerable ends - notably the destruction of Israel. But their actions will continue to enjoy widespread sympathy, if not support, even in the western world, until Israel is seen to moderate its own appetites and conceit. Israel's ability and willingness to employ massive force at will diminishes international support for its cause. Military successes are not only meaningless, but counter-productive.

The best guarantee of long-term Israeli security would be a prosperous and successful Palestinian society which has something to lose. The best assurance of indefinite Israeli insecurity is a shrinking Palestinian landholding occupied by a

fastrising and despairing population. Not for a moment do any of us who know the region underestimate the intransigence and irrationality of Palestinian and indeed Arab behaviour. Whatever pretexts Arabs may use to justify it, nothing can excuse the naked and shameless anti-semitism which is commonplace even in supposedly moderate Arab societies such as Egypt and the Gulf states. No nation can be expected complacently to endure terrorist attack. Only a fool would suggest that an accommodation, never mind a peaceful settlement, can be easily or quickly achieved. There is a vast historic legacy of rival grievances. A senior Israeli army officer spoke to me in 2005 in dismissive terms about Hamas and Hizbollah: 'They can wake up in the morning and prepare their bombs, but they don't have the political leadership - we have arrested so many of them. We have to send one message: You can endure- but so can we. Never let terrorists feel terrorism pays. Of course it hurts. But it's going to hurt them more than it hurts us. They will lose the support of the world, and they will not be able to achieve their political goals'.

The evidence of Lebanon in 2006 and of Gaza in 2008 suggests that Israel's decision-makers still believe this. Many of us disagree. A beginning will only be possible when Israelis acknowledge that every bomb dropped by their aircraft, every shell fired by their tanks represents a nail in hope for their own future, not an earnest of their power. Israel has tested to destruction the utility of force in achieving its security. It is not enough to assert proudly that the Jewish state remains a democracy and haven of free speech in a region in which neither of these precious things is much in evidence, if that same democracy behaves in a fashion which denies mercy to the weak. For someone like me, who enjoyed a love affair with Israel 40 years ago, it is heartbreaking to see the story come to such a pass. It is because so many of us so much want to see Israel prosper in security and peace that we share a sense of tragedy that 61 years after the state was born amid such lofty ideals, it should be led by such a man as Bibi Netanyahu, committed to policies which can yield nothing honourable or lasting. Amoz Oz's 1979 prophesy to me has alas been fulfilled. It will be as great a misfortune for Israel as for the Palestinians, if its governments persist in their past delusions through the years ahead.

- from '**Limits of Force in the Middle East**', one of the **Leonard Stein lectures delivered by Max Hastings**
<http://image.guardian.co.uk/sysfiles/Guardian/documents/2009/05/08/limitsofforce-hastings.pdf>