
Beyond Hypocrisy

By Mark LeVine

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What happens when all sides of a conflict are mired in hypocrisy? [EPA]

Almost two millennia ago, the great Chinese military leader and strategist Zhuge Liang admonished his fellow military men that "when hypocrisy sprouts, even if you have the wisdom of ancient warrior kings you could not defeat a peasant, let alone a crowd of them".

He might have well added that hypocrisy is as harmful for the peasants trying to win a measure of freedom as it is to the king that is trying to defeat them.

Which brings us to a question that too few scholars, policy makers and activists have considered in trying to resolve some of the most frustrating conflicts in the Middle East: What happens when all sides of a conflict are so mired in hypocrisy that no one can steer a path towards some sort of solution?

A limit on force

It is easy to see the hypocrisy of the powerful. It takes little effort to compare the democracy and freedom rhetoric of successive US administrations to the reality of war, occupation and support for oppressive and corrupt regimes.

Similarly, Israel's routine declarations in support of a peaceful resolution to its conflict with the Palestinians are easily contradicted by its actions on the ground in the Occupied Territories.

On the other hand, emerging global powers like China are alternatively credited and criticised for their lack of political or diplomatic hypocrisy. They do business with almost every government as long as it suits their strategic interests with no pretension to worrying about human rights or other basic freedoms.

Yet however corrosive to democratic governance in war-torn "imperial democracies" like the US, hypocrisy can serve as a useful check on the otherwise raw deployment of political power. The need to appear to follow certain norms or self-described ideals places some limits on the use of force; that is one of the key reasons for the development of the new US counterinsurgency strategy deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Indeed, according to the now infamous Rolling Stone expose, one of the things that led to General Stanley McChrystal's unpopularity with many of his troops was precisely his insistence that his troops go out of their way to avoid harming Afghan civilians, even if it meant putting themselves at greater risk during military operations.

Hypocrisy and power

Mixing violence with non-violence undermines the larger mission [AFP] But, what happens when the weaker, oppressed and/or occupied side of a conflict, or those supporting it, engage in hypocrisy of their own?

Hypocrisy is always a double edged sword; but in the case of anti-colonial struggles both sides of the blade cut the weaker party more deeply.

The Bush administration deployed a clearly hypocritical democracy rhetoric in Iraq because it provided enough of a veneer of legitimacy to allow US forces to become permanently entrenched in the country.

The duplicitous behaviour of various Sunni and Shia groups enabled the US to solidify its position.

In the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Israeli government hypocrisy surrounding the peace process has long provided just enough legitimacy to ensure the quiescence of the majority of the Israeli Jewish public, and as importantly, the support of the US political and media establishments.

For their part, Palestinians have not had the luxury of hypocrisy. The duplicities and moral inconsistencies of Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and Hamas leaders - from pledging democracy and accountability while ruling through violence and corruption, to supporting a two-state solution in English while speaking far more radically in Arabic - have long been expertly exploited by Israel to argue that the larger Palestinian peace discourse was a fraud or, at least, untenable.

Cost-benefit calculus

The Gaza flotilla tragedy that saw nine Turkish activists killed by Israeli commandos offers an object lesson in the costs and benefit calculus of hypocrisy when engaged in by, or in this case, on behalf of, Palestinians. And it is one that future flotillas would do well to take heed of.

While the vast majority of activists participating in the flotilla were committed to non-violence, the well organised group of dozens of activists from the IHH movement who, as the captain of the Mavi Marmara revealed and video of an on board rally before the raid confirmed, planned to attack Israeli commandos when they boarded the ship, provided just enough evidence of hypocrisy on the part of the flotilla.

Why would a peaceful and non-violent humanitarian mission violently attack soldiers, the Israeli government and its supporters argued to discredit or at least call into question the larger mission in crucial sectors of the Israeli and American media and political establishments.

As non-violence expert Michael Nagler, who was consulted by organisers of the flotilla about how to deal with just such a scenario, explains: "Our point was that ... in non-violence, as in many other activities, it's a bad idea to do two things at once. However, mixing aid with controversial delivery people is nothing compared to what must be avoided at all costs: confusing non-violence with violence."

Doing two things at once, particularly mixing violence with non-violence, offered Israel the opening it needed to challenge the entire flotilla.

"Once again, Israel faces hypocrisy and a biased rush to judgement," Binyamin Netanyahu, the Israeli prime minister, argued in defending the commandos' actions.

Later, he suggested that flotilla activists should sail to Tehran, exclaiming: "I call on all human rights activists in the world go to Tehran, that's where there is a human rights violation."

Wedge of truth

The use of violence allowed Netanyahu to deploy the usual Israeli rhetoric [EPA] Netanyahu has a point.

The Iranian government, which offered strong support to the flotilla and threatened to send its own ships to escort the next one, is flagrantly violating the most basic human, civil and political rights of its citizens.

Peace and democracy activists should be routinely sending flotillas to Iran in solidarity with the democracy movement there. They could certainly send one to Latakia, Syria's main Mediterranean port, as well, since the support by the regime of Bashar al-Assad, the Syrian president, for the flotilla certainly does not square with its own autocratic rule.

And why not continue to Turkey, whose government provided the most direct support for the flotilla? It is certainly disingenuous to criticise the Israeli occupation and all its attendant human rights violations when it continues to prosecute its own citizens, such as well known Kurdish singer Ferhat Tunc, merely for their political views. More broadly, it refuses to consider the national rights of its Kurdish population - whose ethnic and linguistic identity is far older than that of Palestinians - never mind coming clean about the Armenian genocide.

Crucially, this small wedge of truth allowed Netanyahu to pry open the otherwise near universal condemnation of the Israeli assault on the flotilla and its siege of Gaza, creating the space to continue deploying the standard Israeli rhetoric of describing anyone who supports Palestinians as "opposing peace," while declaring falsely that neither Arab states nor Palestinians are willing to engage in "direct negotiations".

Most of the world do not buy his arguments, but most of the world is not his intended audience, which is limited primarily to two crucial constituencies - Jewish Israeli citizens and diaspora Jews on the one hand, and friendly governments and media establishments, particularly in the US and Western Europe, on the other.

Indeed, in the US, Barack Obama, the US president, has gone as far as to warn Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the Turkish prime minister, that his support for an international probe into the killing of the nine activists "could have negative consequences for Turkey," specifically because it could "turn into a double edged sword" if investigators dug too deep into the government's support for the IHH.

More damaging, the mixing of violence, however minor, with non-violence, has caused aid groups to question the wisdom of participating in future flotillas.

A senior official in one of the US groups that has helped organise previous efforts explained to me: "We've had to really think whether we can participate in any more flotillas, because look where the money is coming from [meaning the IHH]. Not just the violence aboard the one ship, but the hypocrisy of the IHH preaching humanitarian aid while supposedly engaging in violent rhetoric and actions forces us to stop doing precisely the work that most needs to be done or risk alienating our own supporters."

Opposing flotillas

Israelis have also grabbed onto Netanyahu's hypocrisy accusations.

Soon after the killings aboard the Mavi Marmara the Union of Israeli University Students declared its intention to create its own flotilla, firstly to sail out and meet the next aid flotilla and ask them why they are focusing obsessively on Israel when their own governments have so much blood on their hands. If possible, they also want to sail to Turkey in support of the country's Kurdish population.

"The goal of our flotilla is to show the hypocrisy of the Gaza flotilla organisers," explained Boaz Toporovsky, a lawyer by training and the union's president.

"They are showing a virtual reality, but we want peace, and we know that most everyone, Jews and Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, all want peace. But we need to show that we are a peaceful people, not vicious conquerors as the media depicts us, so we'll come with no sticks, stones, slingshots. We want to point out that Gaza is not the world's biggest problem."

For Toporovsky, the Kurdish issue is crucial. "We're trying to show the overreaction of the Turkish state. It's occupying, it's killing, it occupies Kurdistan and oppresses Kurds. It occupied North Cyprus and ethnically cleansed it. So, while Turkish activists have the right to talk about Gaza, I think that when someone wants another to act in a way they should show the example by taking care of their own house."

Hypocrisy is written all over the Gaza flotillas as far as Toporovsky is concerned. "One third of Israel is under threat from Hamas missiles. I don't know any sovereign country that would let missiles like that strike it routinely. The US wouldn't be as nice as us if the west coast was under a similar threat from Mexico. No other country would be either."

Joining together

It is time to view the conflicts in the region holistically [AFP] Toporovsky is certainly correct in his last statement. But of course, his justification is precisely that used by Hezbollah and Hamas for their military actions against Israel in response to Israeli violence and occupation.

He seems to sense the problem, as he went on to explain that members of his own group "talk about hypocrisy all the time".

"There is a part of the population that doesn't recognise the Palestinians' right to the land and part of the government who wants to have as many settlements as possible.

"But this is not a matter for the flotilla. For the flotilla we focus on the hypocrisy of the world."

Israel is, of course, as much a part of the world as any other country. And in that context, neither Toporovsky nor the Gaza flotilla organisers have considered a third alternative to focusing on one or the other forms of oppression: Why can there not be flotillas to Gaza and to Istanbul, or the Iranian port city of Bandar Lengeh? Why can activists on all sides not join together to break the siege of Gaza,

demand greater respect for Kurdish rights and democracy in Iran?

Such a strategy, of looking at the many conflicts and struggles in the region holistically is gradually dawning on activists across the region. It is perhaps one of the few positive developments of the post-9/11 era.

Whereas a decade ago there were very few Israeli or diaspora Jewish movements actively pursuing a peace and justice agenda vis-a-vis Palestinians and willing directly to challenge the official Israeli narrative and discourse, today it is hard to keep up with all the new groups who are dedicated to challenging the occupation and the "settler Judaism" that enables it.

They point out that the Bible specifically prohibits cutting down fruit bearing trees, a major tactic settlers use to hurt Palestinians and quote the Prophet Isaiah demanding that the People of Israel "unlock the fetters of oppression ... Let the exploited go free, break off every chain".

Muslim activists similarly take inspiration from Islam's essentially "orthopraxic" nature, which demands ethical behaviour as much as proper religious practice, to challenge the fetishisation of violence among militants.

Christians, particularly in Palestine, look to the life of Jesus as a model of non-violent direct action against injustice.

Holistic non-violent strategy

But there is a difference between religious inspiration and developing a coherent strategy of holistic non-violent resistance against oppression. Such a move, in fact, is at the heart of the non-violent resistance strategies of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King.

Gandhi famously said that non-violence was much harder than violence and took endlessly more patience and discipline.

His disciple King was especially attuned to the role of hypocrisy in sustaining racism in the US. He developed a strategy of non-violent direct action whose goal was precisely to reveal the "tensions" within American society that the oppression of blacks produced, and in so doing to create "such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue".

King described this strategy as "non-violent coercion" - using boycotts, sit-ins, education and other forms of militant confrontation it forced the rest of the US to own up to the realities of institutionalised racism.

What protesters today who would mix, however lightly, violence and non-violence do not understand is that once the mirror is muddied, so to speak, you can no longer hold it up to the larger society to reflect their own hypocrisy and injustice.

Moreover, violence, even when largely symbolic - as on the Gaza flotilla, or even the theatre of stone throwing that symbolised the largely non-violent first intifada - makes it that much harder to confront an oppressor with their own contradictions because violence inherently creates new ones on both sides that overshadow the central

tension.

Lessons from first intifada

The theatrical violence of stone-throwing corroded the first intifada [AFP] One of the main ongoing debates about the first intifada surrounds the ubiquitous practice of stone throwing.

Many analysts within and outside of Palestinian society argue that the theatrical violence of stone-throwing ultimately corroded the intifada as it became part of a spectrum that increasingly included more overt violence against other Palestinians and Israelis and took a huge physical toll on the Palestinian population.

Palestinian activists like Mubarak Awad, an early proponent of Palestinian non-violence, have long tried to deploy similar strategies in the Occupied Territories. And Israel, understanding the danger posed by them, has routinely deployed even more violence in response, as the routine killing of unarmed protesters at various anti-settlement or anti-wall protests illustrates.

Many Palestinian leaders and activists have adopted non-violence as a valid tactic but few have been willing to adopt it as the primary strategy of resistance, because, in the words of one leader, it would signal weakness to an opponent that only knows the language of force and strength.

What King's philosophy and that of contemporary groups who provide non-violence training such as the Ruckus Society - who have in fact been approached by Palestinian groups for training - tell us is that a commitment to non-violence must run deep into the heart of the society if it is to succeed long-term. When faced with non-violence oppressors usually escalate their violence until something snaps in the society at large and the legitimacy of the whole system breaks down.

The question is whether we are approaching such a moment in Israel/Palestine. The success of various forms of non-violence such as the spread of the boycott movement and the flotillas to Gaza has led even Hamas and Hezbollah to signal their appreciation of the power of non-violent resistance as a potentially more effective strategy than violence in taking on Israel.

Only a few years ago, such an admission was impossible to imagine.

The obstacles to such an awareness becoming a well developed strategy are formidable, however.

At its heart, non-violence demands no longer seeing the oppressor as one's enemy but instead as a "sick brother" who needs love to break down the resistance. Because of this, non-violent action engaged in with anger and hatred, as happened on the Mavi Marmara, will not succeed in defeating violence, precisely because those practicing it do not understand the need for self transformation as well as for transforming their adversary.

Beyond nationalism

Seeing one's enemy as a brother or sister is not merely difficult to do psychologically, it presents a direct threat to the larger ideologies underlying the conflicts in the Middle East, particularly Israel/Palestine.

As none other than Rav Avraham Isaac Kook, considered a spiritual father of right-wing Zionism, pointed out about 70 years ago: "The very thought of nationalism is despicable to God, for He equates all mankind. The goal is to seek the true success of all God's creations.

True justice means that one views with equal concern the advancement of the entire human race."

Kook himself was unable to square this insight with his support for a nationalism that he understood would lead Zionists to "receive the mistaken impression that the Torah endorses this attitude, whereby we should assign a greater value to our own people's good than to the welfare of others".

To this day, the majority of Jews, Muslims, Christians and other faiths continue to interpret their religious texts in ways that endorse the very chauvinism and narrow identities against which all great religions, in their essence, preach.

Finally, a new generation is emerging that is trying to return to the texts and pull out precisely the kinds of wisdom that would support non-violent transformation within and between their societies.

It remains to be seen whether this insight has arrived too late to save Israelis and Palestinians from themselves, but it is clear that those who have chosen this path deserve the support of all people who wish for a peaceful and just resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflicts, and those across the region.

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