

## **From Brexit to Gaza and Back**

### **Ferry Biedermann in Amsterdam**

Why talk about Gaza in a Brexit blog? Well, the same question could be asked of the whole of British politics over the last couple of weeks: why so much attention on Gaza? Apart from the humanitarian imperative, which becomes harder to ignore all the time, the most glaring answer is the internal and electoral politics of the Labour party. At least, it would seem so from what we see in most of the media. Astonishingly, the Tories appear mostly to be getting a free pass on the issue, while at the same time fanning the flames of anti-Muslim sentiment that then contribute to Labour's discomfort. Does that seem far-fetched? Well, in a more neutral atmosphere not each and every pro-Palestinian utterance and even faux-pas would be so magnified that it would land ostensibly sensible politicians in a pickle. Of course, some might object, with elections looming, we're in campaign mode and such shenanigans are part of the game. But since when is stoking hatred an acceptable part of the democratic process? I can think of a couple of isolated occasions and the most recent one is Brexit and the xenophobia that has accompanied it.

Labour shoulders its own share of the blame, for still being in the throes of the Corbyn-era internal divisions over antisemitism. Keir Starmer knows he has a couple of tasks to make himself electable and first on the list is to prove that he's not Corbyn. A close second is to demonstrate that he has the authority to keep in check what part of the electorate still sees as Labour's factionalism, including militant left-wing radicalism. The ructions over the Gaza debate confront him with both, and in spades. In the process, Labour has alienated a section of Muslim voters who would under different circumstances support the party. In a general election, however, we'd have to see who they split for, which is also the case with Joe Biden in the US. What is the alternative for those voters? Opt for a Conservative party that has cleverly manoeuvred to stay out of the firing line on Gaza by having the Foreign Secretary make some sympathetic noises on a Palestinian state while at the same time firmly avoiding a firmer call for a ceasefire? But that's to be expected from the Tories, as are their anti-Muslim dog-whistles. Electorally, these are not things they are likely to pay a price for, not in the same way that Labour might. Even if these voters stay home, rather than come out to vote for Labour, it might already make the difference between an overall majority or a hung parliament.

What is awful in all this is that the discussion in the UK and also increasingly in the US is focused on electoral politics and not on what's happening on the ground in the Middle East. And that's without a doubt horrendous. An understandable Israeli reaction and even over-reaction in the immediate aftermath of the Hamas attack and hostage taking on 7 October last year has turned out to be something entirely different. Even if we account for the horrors of war, the treatment of the civilian population, restricting water supplies and not allowing in sufficient aid, seems more driven by a political than a military paradigm. The same reality can be seen in the West Bank, where both settlers and the Israeli army have escalated their violence. The Middle East, including Israel and the Palestinian territories, used to be my patch when I was a correspondent. Whatever the dynamic of the conflict and mutual violence, there has always been widespread impunity for both Israeli settlers and soldiers. It is not surprising that this has worsened even further under successive right-wing governments, especially the one that has been in place since the end of 2022.

Benjamin Netanyahu has always been an ultra-nationalist, right-wing politician, some blame him for inciting hatred against Yitzhak Rabin leading up to his assassination. But he was a

cautious Prime Minister at the same time, preferring to keep his options open and avoid overly antagonising his Western allies. Arguably since corruption charges against him five years ago, he has increasingly abandoned that caution and his extremism has been more on display. It was a mistake, that I made initially too, to think that he might conduct a war in Gaza, which could arguably be necessary to curb Hamas, in a way that was broadly in line with Western democratic values, even with its attendant horrendous toll in human suffering. It might be delusional to think that such a military option was realistic in the first place, but it certainly is not with Netanyahu and his extremist coalition partners in charge. He bears grave responsibility for the worsening of the situation in Gaza and the West Bank over the past fifteen years, and it's unconscionable that he's still in charge after what happened on 7 October.

But such is the practice of many a modern-day strongman, democratically elected or not, in the mould of a Modi, a Putin, a Trump, an Erdogan or a Xi Jinping. While some might object to placing Netanyahu in this illustrious company, his willingness to wreck his own country in order to hang onto power, his extreme nationalism and his disregard for his own domestic or international legal order, puts him among them. They form a mutual admiration society, even while sometimes at loggerheads. Apart from their extreme nationalism or factionalism they share a preference for autocracy and a disregard for human rights, whether those of their chosen enemy or internal ones. There can be little doubt of their agenda: total freedom to deal with their perceived domestic and foreign opponents as they see fit. Anybody standing in their way or unwilling to be co-opted will be targeted, be they opposition figures or so-called traitors. Foreign opponents will be weakened and undermined by what used to be called psy-ops, nowadays often troll farms and AI bots sowing internal dissent and polarising democratic societies. And we're back at Brexit and migration.

That is not to say it's all just the strongman's fault, nor can the Middle East's problems be ascribed solely to Netanyahu or even Israel. It's often said that a country gets the leaders it deserves, which does not reflect well on the UK over the past decade or so either. In extreme cases, partners, allies and the international community face great difficulty in ameliorating the situation. In the case of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the onerous task that also the mainstream British parties should set themselves is not just to end the immediate violence. It's also to get both sides to sign up to a better future. What seems clear is that this cannot be achieved while either Hamas or Netanyahu remain in charge.