Is Iron Dome anti-peace?

THE REGION
* BY EARRY RUBIN

I hate to spend time discussing US media coverage of Israel. It should be clearly understood that in general this coverage is a farce and should not be taken seriously. Yet there are examples which are irresistible because they are so revealing of the political as well as media assumptions made about Israel that so mislead the Western public and policymakers.

The Washington Post ran a major article explaining that while, on one hand, the Iron Dome missile defense system is a good thing because it blocks missiles that would otherwise kill and injure Israelis as well as cause damage, it is also a bad thing. Thomas Friedman made similar claims. Why?

"For a nation that longs for normalcy and acceptance, one question being debated here is whether Iron Dome will motivate Israel's leaders to pursue peace with the Palestinians and the wider Arab world or isolate them from having to do so."

In other words, if a lot more Israelis were being killed and wounded, Israel would have more incentive to make peace with the Palestinians and Arabs. But since their lives are merely being paralyzed, Israel just isn't interested in making peace.

And who is "debating" this? Well, basically the Post comes up with one name: left-wing author Tom Segev. Nobody is interviewed who ridicules this bizarre thesis.

And who in Israel is arguing that if only they were more bloodied, their hearts would be softened and they would prefer peace to endless conflict? Supposedly Israelis are saying: "Wow, we wish our leaders tried harder to make peace with the Palestinians. Maybe it's because we are too strong and secure." Well, basically the Post comes up with one name: left-wing author Tom Segev. Nobody is interviewed who ridicules this bizarre thesis.

JUST TO MAKE THE SITUATION COMPLETELY CLEAR LET ME BE VERY EXPLICIT: In the 1980s and in 1993 at the time of the Oslo agreements many Israelis argued that because Israel was more secure it could take risks and make concessions to try to achieve peace. A number of specific steps, including Israel's unilateral withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, were based on this same premise. Israel could pull out of the Gaza Strip, uproot all of the settlements there, and not offer any decline in security. That's the historic argument: the more secure Israel was, the more it could offer the Palestinians in the hope that they would make peace. Is that clear?

When a country becomes less secure it must increase its ability to protect itself, including by retaining territory useful for that defense, spending more on military equipment, and not making concessions and taking risks. The only exception is if people feel certain that such concessions and risks would definitely bring a full response from the other side and thus lead to a secure and lasting peace.

Now even leaving aside the Palestinian Authority's intransigence and desire -- clearly visible for the past 12 years -- to avoid a compromise two-state solution, Israel also faces the following new regional features:

* Hamas, which constantly attacks Israel and would continue to do so (indeed, it would escalate attacks) if Israel did reach an agreement with the PA
* An Islamist Egypt whose ruling Muslim Brotherhood group daily speaks of genocidal against Israel and Jews, plus not accepting the 30-year-old peace treaty, not to mention the even more extreme Salafists.
* An Islamized Lebanon, where Hezbollah, the ruling group, constantly threatens to attack and also daily calls for Israel's extinction.
* A hostile Turkey whose rulers support Hamas and Hezbollah.
* A Syria whose radical Islamists seem poised to gain power. They cannot possibly be more anti-Israel than the current regime, but they are willing to make the anti-Israel war a higher priority for direct action.

So this is an era where Israel clearly needs to defend itself. Compare this to the early 1990s.

Saddam Hussein had been defeated in the 1991 war; the radical Arabs' main ally, the USSR, had fallen; America was the sole superpower; the PLO was so weak and depressed that it seemed conceivable it might be pushed into peace because it had no other alternative (in contrast to the contemporary Palestinian Authority which just got recognition as a state and is feeling very confident); and other factors.

That was a moment when Israel could take risks, and did so with the Oslo agreements. And yet, of course we know -- like it or not -- that this "peace process" made things worse, another lesson not processed by the hegemonic political forces in much of the West today.

SO HOW DO WE GET FROM HERE TO DEMANDS THAT ISRAEL MUST KEEP DOING WHAT HAS FAILED AND THE CLAIM THAT THE WEAKER ISRAEL'S STRATEGIC POSITION, THE MORE IT CAN AND SHOULD MAKE CONCESSIONS AND TAKE RISKS?

Such a stance is just about equivalent to saying it is a pity US counterterrorism measures are working, because if more September 11-type attacks were to succeed, Americans would be nicer to Muslims.

Or that if the British air force had not only defeated the Luftwaffe, perhaps prime minister Winston Churchill wouldn't have been so insulated from the need to make peace with the Axis.

What's most infuriating about all of this is not just that Israel has tried so hard to make peace -- including risks and concessions -- but that the very attacks referred to in the Washington Post article were made possible only because Israel withdrew from the Gaza Strip in an attempt to promote peace!

Yet the essential insanity of the kind of thinking epitomized by this article is shielded when it comes to Israel, by the media's bias and seclusion that it can get away with any nonsense when it comes to discussing Israel.

MEANWHILE, THERE is some concern among Israeli intelligence officials with regard to a possible new intifadah in the West Bank. This would be due to new confidence created by the UN's decision to make Palestine a non-member state (the UN's contribution to peace making), a rapprochement between the PA, which rules the West Bank, and Hamas, which rules the Gaza Strip; and the PA's wish to compete with Hamas in attacking Israel and trying to kill Israelis.

Following the logic of the Washington Post we should hope lots of Israelis are killed by terrorists as a way to pressure those obdurate Israelis to make peace.

The Washington Post article basically follows the same Palestinian political line that has prevailed since the 1960s: forget about a negotiated compromise, Israel must be defeated, and Israelis made to suffer. The main goal is to get Israelis to give up altogether and abandon their state; the shorter-term goal is to get Israelis to accept a Palestinian state unconditionally so it can get on with the task of finishing that job.

BEFORE AROUND 1980, the above analysis would have been considered normative in Israel. Between the 1980s and 2000, when there was rising hope of a compromise peace with the PLO and its child, the PA, it would have been considered a right-wing view. Since 2000, however, that assessment -- based on evidence and experience -- has again become that of the overwhelming majority across almost all of the political spectrum.

Internationally, the refusal to face the fact that the Palestinian side is responsible for the failure of peace leads to such bizarre theories and blinds people to the actual situation.

The writer is director of the Global Research in International Affairs (GLORIA) Center, Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya, and editor of The Middle East Review of International Affairs (MERIA) Journal. His latest books are The Israel-Arab Reader (seventh edition), The Long War for Freedom: The Arab Struggle for Democracy in the Middle East (Wiley), and The Truth About Syria (Palgrave-Macmillan). www.gloria-center.org