Blinded By The Gaza Spotlight: What Is Happening In The Shadows?

With Gaza firmly in the international spotlight, few observers seem willing or able to strain their eyes to determine activity in the surrounding shadows blanketing activity in the nearby Israeli-occupied West Bank. Careful stage-management ensures that horrific bombing in the tiny, crowded Gaza Strip, where 1.8 million people are crammed into an area of about 360 square kilometres, maintains global focus on what frequently seems to amount to a twisted carnival-type game involving Israelis shooting fish in a barrel. The show is even more spectacular than the conflict in Ukraine because huge civilian casualties are guaranteed daily in Gaza, making for more sensational journalism.

In no way do I wish to minimize the tragedy of the ongoing slaughter of thousands of innocents in Gaza. I would, however, like to suggest that even as the death toll rises in Gaza, it is extremely important to remain vigilant regarding events in the much larger West Bank, where settlement building and ongoing, widespread human rights abuses continue unabated and unaddressed. Additionally, people should consider that the size and resources of the West Bank could one day provide overcrowded Gaza with tremendous relief from its population pressure, thus reducing the desperation and poverty that help fuel Gazan terrorist activity. This is why it is important that people realize how and why they are manipulated into focusing solely on the devastating problems in Gaza instead of on the potential solutions in the West Bank.

It is difficult not to be cynical about the Gaza drama. It was not an altruistic or benevolent act on Israel's part when the late Prime Minister Ariel Sharon withdrew the last protesting Israeli settlers from Gaza in August 2005. The Israeli withdrawal relieved Israel of the significant burden of protecting Israelis in a cramped, dangerous, resource-poor environment. Uprooted settlers were generously compensated and relocated, with added bonus payments for relocating within certain areas of Israel proper. The withdrawal further helped Israel's international image by being portrayed as a major concession by Israel in terms of the Peace Process. The gesture was designed to "take the heat off" Israel at a time when Israel had already begun building the infamous Wall between Israel and the West Bank, a wall supposedly designed to protect Israel from incursions and attacks, a hideous, looming structure reminiscent of the darkest days in Berlin.

It is much easier for the world to focus on the situation in Gaza than in the West Bank. There are about 1.5 million Palestinians living in the West Bank, and they are spread over 5640 square kilometres. Interspersed among them are up to 500,000 Jewish settlers, a number which is steadily increasing. Contrast that with about 8500 Jewish settlers relocated from Gaza into Israel in August 2005 and the differences between the situations in the West Bank and Gaza become even more stark. Simply put, it was easy and convenient in 2005 for Israel to withdraw from Gaza since it covered only a tiny area, housed only a small number of Jewish settlers, had no significant resources needed by Israel and was generally recognized as an overcrowded Palestinian slum.

I reserve the harshest criticism for those who sanctimoniously announced in 2005 that Gaza had a chance to become a real democracy. Any politician, historian, sociologist or even casual observer could have foretold that fundamentalist Muslims, most likely with ties to known terrorists, would be the only group sufficiently organized to win a general election. Since independent Gaza's fate still remained in the iron grip of the Israelis, the moment
Hamas was elected provided an opportunity for Israel to set up a blockade to isolate, punish and direct international focus onto this tiny, overcrowded slice of land. In doing so, the stage was set for a permanent spotlight on Gaza to deflect outside observers' attention from the situation in the West Bank.

The tragic reality of the neverending Peace Process is that no Israeli government will ever be able to allow the West Bank to become an independent Palestinian state. While Israel cites security concerns, pointing to the rockets fired from Gaza and pointing out how much worse things would be if the West Bank, more than 15 times the area of Gaza, were an independent state, they might as well be comparing apples and oranges

Many observers accept Israel's security justification, but the reality is more complex. The first issue is resource-based. Israel counts on unfettered access to the huge fresh-water aquifer under the West Bank to keep Israel green and luxuriant. Israel rejoiced when it gained control of the aquifer in 1967 and will never allow the Palestinians to control that aquifer without access to large amounts of water from another source. No such alternate water source is on the horizon. The second issue is political. With somewhere around 500,000 Israeli settlers established throughout the West Bank, no Israeli government in recent decades has had the luxury of ignoring the West Bank settler votes. This is not likely to change either, thus there is nothing to be gained by Israeli leaders from peace talks related to creating a truly independent Palestinian state in the West Bank.

The housing market in Jewish settlements in the West Bank backs the assertion that the Israeli government has no intention of ever turning over full sovereignty of the West Bank to the Palestinians. Israel's news outlet Ha'aretz recently detailed skyrocketing house prices in the largest "settlements" in the West Bank, with settlement cities like Ariel and Betar Ilit seeing price increases of 104% and 77% respectively (see Ha'aretz, "Forget Tel Aviv, Israel's Real House Price Boom Is In Ariel" by Hagai Amit, July 25, 2014). Such significant increases in housing prices, affecting hundreds of thousands of Jewish settlers, indicate great settler confidence in assured permanent residency.

The prospects of any Israeli government being strong enough to survive opposition from the settler communities in the West Bank are virtually nil. Therefore the West Bank will never be allowed to become a fully independent Palestinian state. Such harsh truths do not sit well with the international community, thus Israel is desperate to keep stringing along the international community while it completes its slow but steady annexation of the West Bank. In order to do so, Israel must create the illusion of supporting the idea of a two-state solution until it can prove that such a solution is simply not possible due to insurmountable, constant threats to Israel's security from the Palestinians as a whole.

Enter Gaza from Left Stage straight into the spotlight. By allowing an independent state to be created in a tiny, overcrowded, poverty-stricken, economically unviable, isolated strip of land called Gaza, the Israelis have been able to extrapolate and establish a syllogistic argument demonstrating why they must continue to occupy and annex the West Bank. The glaring differences between Gaza and the West Bank are not understood by most nations and observers are happy to assume ignorantly that Gaza is a merely a microcosm of the West Bank.

As intended by the Israelis when they agreed and assisted in setting up the doomed experiment in Palestinian statehood, we find ourselves yet again staring at the spotlight illuminating the horrifying, but thoroughly predictable violence in the artificially created vortex of destruction that is the Gaza Strip. It sucks in all the energy and attention of the media, human rights groups and Muslim nations along with the United States and much of Europe. That there is no viable solution for peace in Gaza under a democratically elected government is tragic but obvious to anyone who wishes to see the truth. What is even more tragic is that the pull of Gaza seems to be so strong that no one appears able to tear their attention away long enough to recognize that the slow, yet still possibly preventable destruction of over 1.5 million Palestinians is underway, under our noses, less than half a day's drive from Gaza in the West Bank.

The world today is facing ongoing civil wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Sudan, Libya Ukraine, Nigeria, The Democratic Republic of Congo, and many other "hot spots". The Palestinian-Israeli battle has become part of the international security landscape for most international observers, and only the most spectacular fireworks seem able to motivate the world to take yet another stab at serious peace talks. Even then, those organizing them are jaded to the point that no negotiators seem to believe success is possible,

During my years working for the US Government, I spent many hours in daily meetings with the key US figures associated with the Peace Process. The meetings were pointless, lacking in substance and highly politically charged in favour of Israel. it was, and still is, far more palatable politically to be able to see, admonish, gasp at and try to negotiate over the terrifying, man-made spectacle in the Gaza spotlight rather than to attempt seeing past Gaza to the much larger West Bank, where the the stakes are much higher, the political risks astronomical, and the logistical
challenge greater. Yet the possibility of a lasting solution outcome in the West Bank could be possible if the Israeli Government were willing to contemplate seriously a true two-state solution.

Over the past month, at least three new settler outposts have been established in the West Bank. Those who built the settlements claim that it is in response to the mysterious and tragic death of three Israeli teenagers. Such an inflammatory response was highly predictable, given the settlers propensity to use any excuse to expand their presence. Meanwhile, during the same period, hundreds of protesting Palestinians in the West Bank have been seriously injured, sometimes leading to fatalities. While I do not have a special ability to predict the future, I would be prepared to state with absolute certainty that there will be more injury and death to come in the West Bank while all eyes remain fixed on Gaza.

The global community may not be able to stop the violence in Gaza, but it could band together to force Israel to give Gazan civilians the choice of living peacefully in less crowded conditions by enforcing international laws against Israeli settlements since 2004 in the West Bank. Unfortunately, Israel has too much to lose by ceding control of the West Bank and will thus likely turn the spotlight beam up a notch or two if it means keeping the world blinded by the horrors of Gaza while Israel continues its steady annexation of the West Bank.

Gwenyth Todd a former Adviser to President Clinton, expert in international security policy, she hold M.A from Georgetown University, exclusively for the online magazine "New Eastern Outlook".