The Guns of Benyamin Netanyahu

By Dr. John Bruni

For far too long those who govern the state of Israel have been allowed to dictate terms on how the Jewish homeland should be defended. There is now an established, almost predictable pattern of behaviour, especially among those who represent the conservative Likud Party, which shows that the use of force or the threat of force, is their instinctive response to safeguard Israel's continuing growth and survival.

To outside observers this might indeed seem a reasonable proposition but let us reflect on the overall strategic situation.

Israel is a country of 7.5 million people, 75% of whom identify themselves as Jewish, while 25% are Arab. The country is surrounded by Arab/Muslim states that either were enemies or currently identify themselves as enemies of Israel. Why? Because of the plight of the Palestinians, a group of people on the receiving end of an ascendant Jewish state.

During the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, the West Bank of Jordan and the Gaza Strip of Egypt were seized and occupied by victorious Israeli forces. Since then, arguments over the necessity to keep these territories as part of Israel have become central to Israeli political discourse. Considering the peculiar nature of Israel itself – a small strip of coastal territory on the Eastern Mediterranean – the country had no strategic depth. Back in the 1960s and 1970s, when strategic depth actually meant something, Israel's military superiority over its hostile neighbours was no 'sure thing'. But that was then.

Now, Israel faces no real existential threat.

The threat Iran poses to Israel through its sponsorship of terrorist groups adjacent to its borders is not that of invasion and occupation, but of opportunistic harassment. Iran's nuclear program, even if it were weaponised, would be used primarily as a bargaining chip to elicit political concessions from Israel, not to wipe the country off the map – Iranian President Ahmadinejad's rhetoric notwithstanding. A nuclear blast anywhere in Israel would damage sites sacred to Christians, Muslims and Jews. In all likelihood it would kill many of the very people Iran says it supports – the Palestinians. Furthermore, such a move would elicit a massive Israeli counter-strike the result of which would cripple Iran for generations.

Indeed, if one were to look at Israel's strategic position in the Middle East, one could

objectively view *Israel* as an existential threat to its neighbours.

It is the Middle East's most powerful state. It is nuclear armed. It has one of the best-trained military forces and intelligence services in the world. It enjoys broad international support and is considered America's most important ally in the Middle East.

Since its founding in 1948, tales of Israeli guerrillas and commandos and their bold endeavours in creating and securing Israel have been mythologised in movie and print. These tales have played their part in attributing to Israel and the Israeli people an almost 'superhuman' ability to fend off their numerous adversaries.

The downside to this mythology is that it has totally de-legitimised the aspirations of Palestinians for a Palestinian state, in part due to Palestinian use of terrorism as a defensive measure. During the Cold War, Yasser Arafat, leader of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) started this 'brand' of Palestinian resistance for his stateless people. Denied the ability to build a conventional military, armed resistance could only be achieved by fighting the Israelis asymmetrically – that is, using unconventional means, including terrorism, to check the overwhelming power of Tel Aviv. Just as the Haganah, Irgun and Lehi Jewish guerrilla

groups undermined British rule in Palestine prior to Israel's independence in 1948.

But in terms of security, what has all this netted Israel?

Israel is deeply insecure in spite of its obvious advantages. Fundamentalism, both Jewish and Islamic, has flourished in this constant climate of mutual fear, loathing and suspicion. Certainly, many Jews and Arabs have, over time, grown beyond their mistrust and hatred and arguably this is the greatest miracle of all; but few of these people find their way to the top of either the Israeli or Palestinian political leadership. For many years Israel, because of the Jewish people's much maligned and tragic history, has been allowed to use methods of conduct largely denied to others in the international community. Even when Israeli covert operations against Arab/Muslim state or non-state actors are uncovered, as was the case recently in Dubai, numerous excuses are found to defend their actions, playing on the international communities' guilt for real or perceived anti-Semitism.

But the hard-line against Palestinians, which has invariably coloured most Israeli governments since 1948, has done no more than perpetuate an unending cycle of complex and confounding crises – often with tragic consequences for Jews and Arabs alike. Furthermore, it has inspired

anti-Israeli sentiment around the world and spurred Muslim fundamentalists to greater efforts to 'save' the Palestinians from their Israeli oppressors.

If an Israeli government were truly genuine about the idea of peace and building stable communities across the Green Line, it would need to act smarter when provoked. The latest crisis involving the Turkish-sponsored 'Freedom Flotilla' is a case in point. Prime Minister Netanyahu must have known that he had at his disposal many possible choices to thwart this humanitarian intervention into Gaza. But instead, true to his instincts and those of his hard-line colleagues, he 'reached for the gun'. With nine Turkish nationals killed, Turkey in mourning and the world outraged, one can safely say that this was a public relations disaster of monumental proportions. Indeed, so much so that Israel has, by this one action, threatened to derail its long-standing relationship with Turkey.

Should Ankara downgrade or, worse still, sever all ties to Israel, this will have enormous strategic implications for the Jewish state. It will further diplomatically isolate Israel from the Middle East region and again raise the hackles of the Arab and Muslim 'street' which will in turn increase domestic political pressure on Israel's few remaining 'confederates' such as the government of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt.

***

SAGE International
Strategic Advice & Geopolitical Estimates