

The Biden Administration's Stupendous Willful Disconnect from Reality

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Last Saturday, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken told the Munich Security Conference that the post-Gaza war scenario provides an "extraordinary opportunity" for Arab governments to open relations with Israel. After stressing the "urgent" need for establishing a Palestinian state without spelling out how this could be done, he stated,

"Virtually every Arab country wants to integrate Israel into the region, to normalise relations if they haven't already done so, to provide security assurances and commitments so that Israel can feel more safe and more secure."

This was an amazing statement which reflects the Biden administration's stupendous willful disconnect from reality. "Israel" and its needs were featured in each of his three sentences, but Arab concerns were ignored. He refused to admit Israel had become the aggressor in the Gaza war by employing massively disproportionate force to retaliate for Hamas attack on southern Israel. Blinded by Israel's losses, Blinken totally ignored the sea change Israel's deadly and devastating onslaught has wrought among Arabs and citizens of the globe.

Blinkered Blinken clearly did not tune into news of well-organised pro-Palestinian mass protests which erupted in 120 cities across the world on Saturday, including London where 250,000 rallied to demand an immediate ceasefire and freedom for Palestine. Protesters in Madrid, Istanbul, Vienna, Paris, Amsterdam, Jakarta and Stockholm condemned Israel's threat to invade Rafah where 1.4 million Gazans have taken refuge from Israel's devastating war.

This is an Israeli war like no other. Israel's 1948 war of establishment and successor wars have not gripped and traumatised millions of Arabs, Europeans, Africans and Asians as has

the ongoing war on Gaza. Newspapers are filled with articles on the gory results of Israeli carpet bombing of Gazan neighbourhoods, refugee camps, hospitals, schools and shelters.

For tens of millions the war has invaded their homes as satellite television channels broadcast real-time images of the suffering of Gazan families digging children from the rubble of destroyed homes. Relatives carry weeping wounded children to besieged hospitals where amputations are performed without anaesthetics. Watchers become witnesses who are both captured and traumatised by horrors unfolding before their eyes and pounding in their ears, by the blood and tears, the body count and fears for the wounded and disappeared.

The war is deeply personal because daily coverage also invades social media with images of suffering, experts' commentaries, and politicians' justifications for doing nothing to halt the carnage. People cannot escape the war on mobile phones tucked into their pockets.

The latest poll commissioned by the Washington-based Arab Centre reveals how the Gaza war has impacted Arab attitudes toward Israel and the US. The survey of 8,000 respondents was conducted between December 12th, 2023, and January 5th, 2024. The 16 Arab countries included were Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Tunisia, the Palestinian West Bank and Yemen, representing "more than 95 per cent of the population across the Arab region".

Blinken clearly did not bother to acquaint himself with this survey. If he had he would have learned that 59 per cent of respondents "had become certain there would be no possibility for peace with Israel", 14 per cent said they had "serious doubts" peace with Israel could be achieved, and 9 per cent did not believe in peace with Israel "in the first place". This left 13 per cent clinging to the hope that peace with Israel was possible.

The pollsters reported that among those surveyed 59 per cent followed the news daily and 20 per cent several times a week; 54 per cent relied on satellite television, 36 per cent favoured social media. Fifty-one per cent rated the US as the largest threat to the stability of the region, Israel 26 per cent; 76 per cent said their opinion of US policy has "become more negative than before the war". Forty-two per cent said US policies during the war would "very much" harm US regional interests and 23 per cent "somewhat" harm US interests. Ninety-two per cent believed Palestine is an Arab cause and 89 per cent were against Arab recognition of Israel, up from 84 per cent in 2022.

The latest Gaza war is the culmination of 75 years of near constant warfare with Israel and three-quarters of a century of trauma inflicted upon generations of Palestinians and Arabs. Israel's 1948 war of establishment, known by Palestinians as Al Naqba (The Debacle), ended with Israel's conquest of 78 per cent of Palestine. This war inflicted the 20th century's first major defeat and psychological trauma on the Arabs. The West regarded the emergence of Israel as a triumph at a time the US and Europe were recovering from revelations of the Holocaust. The Arab world refused to recognise Israel and pretended it did not exist. The war was well covered in newspapers and cinema newsreels and on radio in the region and the West.

The 1956 war on Egypt mounted by Britain, France, and Israel in response to Cairo's nationalization of the Suez Canal was a desperate attempt to overthrow President Gamal Abdel Nasser. He not only survived but was hailed as a hero across the region. This war of

aggression was seen in the West as the last gasp of European colonialism and was covered by newspapers, radio, and television, which had emerged as a key media outlet.

Israel's second successful war of conquest in 1967 dealt another deep psychological shock to the Arab world, which vowed, "No peace with Israel, no relations with Israel and no negotiations with Israel." The West, including media, celebrated Israel's victory while the Arabs were embittered and alienated.

The October 1973 war was the first to be initiated by the Arabs — Egypt and Syria — against Israel and provided a boost to the Arab public opinion although Israel — after receiving the usual infusion of US weapons - regained territory recaptured by Egypt and Syria. Since Israel's military was caught napping, Israelis reeled from the shock of the surprise. Western media coverage was biased in favour of Israel, as usual.

This changed in June 1982 when Israel invaded Lebanon while scores of foreign correspondents were based in Beirut and reported on Israel's blitz on cities and Palestinian camps in the south. Israel's sustained, indiscriminate bombing of Beirut compelled US President Ronald Reagan to order a halt in August. Mature global public opinion has never recovered from massive media coverage of the massacre of hundreds of Palestinian civilians by Israel's local Christian proxies while the Sabra and Chatila refugee camps were surrounded by the Israeli forces. Israel's 2006 war on Lebanon was closely covered by Arab media which reflected popular feelings and Western media which no longer adored Israel.

International as well as Arab media were able to report reasonably on Israel's Gaza wars in 2008-2009, 2012, 2014 and 2021 but only courageous Palestinian reporters have been able to cover the current all-out Israeli onslaught. At least, 126 have lost their lives. For a change we see and hear their war as it unfolds and partake of their trauma despite Israel's mainly unconvincing efforts to influence our perceptions in its favour.

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