Devastating Chronologies: Israel, Time, and Power

by Louis René Beres

Facing an increasingly complex configuration of terrorist foes, Israel has been focusing diligently on all of the usual strategies for remediation. At the same time, Jerusalem has overlooked the core importance of *chronology* to pertinent enemy belief systems and policies. Over *time*, this omission could prove manifestly perilous.

In the Middle East, certain principal linkages between time and power warrant prompt and serious examination. On the surface, most conspicuously, the struggle between Israel and the Arabs is about *space*. Largely ignored, however, is that this relentless conflict is also about *time.* Indeed, while seemingly counter-intuitive, the chronological dimension of this conflict is actually *more critical* to understanding war and peace in the region.

For Israel in particular, time really does matter. Merely to survive, the Jewish State's protracted fight against war and terror will have to be conducted (1) with greater subtlety than can be offered by narrowly standard military intelligence; and (2) with greater imagination than can generally be supplied by weapon systems and doctrine. In essence, this existential fight will require more determined and discerning attentiveness to chronology based determinants of enemy power.

For Israel in particular, history really does matter. By rejecting all measurable chronologies as little more than linear progression, the early Hebrews had already approached time with refined intellectual sophistication. That is, an approach containing the inherently-perplexing idea of time as *qualitative* experience. For these early Hebrews, chronology was normally understood as something *subjective,* as a living human property, and as a human property logically inseparable from its personally infused content.

The Jewish prophetic vision, which ultimately gave birth to Christianity, and also to much of the modern world, had identified a community existing *under* a transcendent God, and *in* time. Political *space* in this system was also important, but, significantly, not because of territoriality as such. Here the importance of *space* — today we speak both politically and strategically of *land* — had stemmed from something markedly less tangible.

This true source was the particular *nexus of sacred events* that had taken place within ancient

Israel's boundaries. These boundaries, in turn, were taken as important, because these events had been of presumptively divine origin. Then, the community's valuation of space had little or nothing to do with providing any operational protection for the always-vulnerable Jewish Commonwealth.

For present-day Israel, the conceptual space-time relationship has two basic dimensions which need to be better understood, in Jerusalem, of course, but also in Washington.

First, and utterly axiomatic, is this determination: Any further territorial surrenders by Israel would reduce the amount of measurable time that Israel still has left to resist catastrophic war, terrorism, and conceivably genocide. Most obviously, in this regard, a Palestinian state — any Palestinian state — could quickly choose to support a variety of Islamist insurgents determined to absorb "Occupied Palestine" (the rest of Israel) into the new Arab state. A growing prospect in this regard could concern now authoritatively expected ISIS inroads across eastern Jordan. Such inroads, after all, could bring fiercely fanatical Jihadist forces directly into the West Bank (Judea/Samaria).

In *time,* ISIS could overrun "Palestine," a generally unseen scenario suggesting that the principal impediment to Palestinian statehood is not really Israel, but rather, another competing band of Sunni Arab terrorists.

Second, any further Israeli territorial surrenders, especially when considered together, could provide additional *time* for Israel's myriad enemies to await an ideally perfect attack opportunity. Precisely when such an optimal moment would become recognizable to Israel's relevant adversaries could ultimately depend upon the different terror groups' selected notions of time.

For present-day Israel, time *is* power. "*Yesterday,*" warned Samuel Beckett, in his oft-cited analysis of Proust, *"is not a milestone that has been passed, but a daystone on the beaten track of the years, and irremediably a part of us, heavy and dangerous."* Beckett, the prescient playwright creator of *Godot*, would likely have understood Israel's current chronology-based risks and corollary obligations.

Credo quia absurdum. "I believe because it is absurd." At times, the poet may supply better intellectual defenses than even the career military strategist.

A subjective metaphysics of time, a complex reality that is based not on clocks and sequentially- numbered increments, but upon *felt* representations, of time *as lived*, should more seriously influence Israel's foreign policy. Among other things, Israel must try to

understand the different ways in which individual countries and terror groups might choose to live *within* time. If certain *Jihadist* terrorist organizations were judged willing to accept identifiably short time horizons in their search for bringing a cataclysmic end to Israel, the Israeli military response (to these anticipated enemy aggressions) would have to be correspondingly swift.

Plausibly, and even more concretely, any such perceived enemy willingness could heighten Israel's incentive to undertake defensive first-strikes. In the language of international law, these strikes, if permissible, would be an expression of *anticipatory self-defense,* This preemptive posture could represent a binding portion of customary jurisprudence, one that has its origins in an 1837 case called *The Caroline.*

If, however, it would seem that this enemy apocalyptic time horizon were actually "long," Israel's policy response could afford to be appropriately less urgent. Israel could then choose to rely more upon the relatively passive and problematic strategic dynamics of *deterrence* and *defense*. For example, in addition to ISIS and related Sunni terrorist fighters, Hezbollah, and its own kindred Shiite militia forces, will need to be studied for their prevailing views of time and power. Here, the starkly apocalyptic elements of enemy policy could become still more consequential.

In the Middle East, "last things," or eschatology, must remain genuinely central to Israeli strategic understanding and military planning.

Of very special interest to Israel should be the generally hidden time horizon of the *Jihadist* suicide bomber. Contrary to conventional wisdom, this grotesque adversary *is* afraid of death, so afraid, in fact, that he is enthusiastically willing to "kill" himself (or herself) as a sacred means of overcoming mortality. Recalling the preferred imagery of Kurt Vonnegut, the late Indiana writer, any such strategy of transcending death could offer certain susceptible terrorists a way to "unstop time."

In world politics, there can never be any greater promise of power than power over death. By definition, such power must always be based upon antecedent power over time. Accordingly, Israel could benefit from finally "decoding" a growing and paradoxical mindset, one that identifies "suicide" with eternal life. Such an effort would need to focus upon a plainly primary *Islamist* idea. Apropos of Vonnegut, this idea is the unambiguously seductive notion that time need not always have a "stop."

Although almost never acknowledged, Israel's primary task is intellectual. To survive, therefore, it must first learn how to transform a widespread enemy understanding that links

heroic "martyrdom" to the conquest of time. For now, at least, some of Israel's adversaries still regard *"Death for Allah"* as the best way to soar indispensably and ecstatically above *profane time*.

In this way, these enemies reason, believers may choose *rationally* to live forever.

In Jerusalem and Washington, key decision-makers must finally realize that the Islamic suicide bomber sees himself or herself as a *religious sacrificer*. Each such adversary, whether Sunni or Shiite, consciously aims to escape from *profane* time, or time without meaning, to a time that is perpetual, and consequently *sacred.* By willfully abandoning the ticking clock increments that imprison ordinary mortals, and thereby condemn them to a death everlasting, the suicide bomber slaughters both "heathen" and "infidel" in an eternally grateful exchange for *immortality*.

In this connection, Israel must soon acknowledge more explicitly that there can also be "suicide states." Today, the most obvious candidate for any such designation would be Iran. Doctrinally, at least, this soon to be nuclear Islamic Republic is committed to an unambiguously apocalyptic narrative of Shiite theology.

Jerusalem's immediate policy response to all this should be clear and purposeful. More precisely, Israel must somehow convince prospective suicide bombers, both individuals and states, that any intended "sacrifice" of Jews or the Jewish State could never elevate them above the fixedly mortal limits of time. For this process of convincing to "work," however, the prospective enemy "sacrificers" would first need to be assured that: (1) they are not now living in *profane* time; and (2) that every sacrificial killing would actually represent a *profanation* of their one true faith.

Accomplishing this complex sort of persuasion will not be easy. It may even require the transnational cooperation of certain leading Islamic clerics. More immediately, however, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will need to acknowledge certain core enemy perceptions of chronology as authentic threats to Israel's security. Thereafter, Jerusalem's task should be to systematically "de-link" such wishful perceptions from long-held enemy dispositions to war and terror.

This very same attention to *time* ought to be taken up soon in Washington.

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