

STOLEN CARS

(On Living Next Door to the Jungle)

Jenia, Number 2 daughter, lives in Beit Zayit, a moshav-suburb just outside of Jerusalem. Linda the Vet, her boss, was overseas for a couple of weeks so Jenia was keeping her car. It was a shiny Subaru, which in this part of the world means desirable for spare parts, because it got stolen in broad daylight from right in front of her house.

The phone rang that same evening. Whoever had the car—it was either the thief himself or (more likely) the dealer who bought the vehicle from the thief—had found Linda's name and her cell phone number, and Jenia had the phone. Did she want the car back? Then she needed to find an Arab friend and have him show up at the Rama checkpoint (north of the city) with NIS 20,000 (a bit more than \$5000) and they would see she got it back. Not a bad deal actually; the insurance company would have to pay less than half of what it would have cost to replace the whole car.

Jenia stalled, said she would have to ask her boss, would call him back, etc., all in an attempt (which was successful in the end) to trace his phone and find out who the guy was and where he was calling from. But the deal was never going to happen in any case; the word is (and the police confirmed this) that what usually happens is that they take the money and run like hell and you are stuck with a double loss.

The Police were a little clotty, as it turned out, insisting that Jenia get a Power of Attorney from Linda (from overseas!) before they would take the complaint. That was stupid, because in the meanwhile the car, not yet listed in the computers as stolen, could not have been spotted at a checkpoint and therefore could easily have been used for criminal or terrorist purposes. Jenia had the document in 48 hours and a complaint was filed but all that didn't matter, of course, because the car thief was calling from somewhere in the West Bank. And it was soon clear that there was no way the Police were going to go in there, even if it was only 5 minutes away, and retrieve that car. Because that would lead to a fight and people would get hurt, maybe killed, and it wasn't worth the trouble.

So that's what happens when you live next to a jungle. The theft might have been prevented if they had ever managed to finish the security barrier wall, but that project is so beset with legal obstacles that it doesn't look like it will ever be complete in the Jerusalem area. There is no law and no order (the terms are usually mutually exclusive, but it doesn't matter because neither exists over there) across that border and the average citizen is simply defenseless against a wave of theft and violent crime from the other side.

We have written here (a while back) of our neighbor Johnny's flock of sheep. It was simply carted away in the course of two nights and he was financially ruined. He and the police knew exactly where that flock had been taken to. But nobody was going to go in there and get it back.

And this is the West Bank, Judea and Samaria, run by the benevolent and moderate Abu Mazen, our partner for peace. President Bush—we saw the helicopters flying over the house—said that just last week and our government apparently believes it.

And if things are borderline uncertain in some places here, imagine what it's like for the poor souls in the Western Negev who have Gaza right over the border. They have not only the wholesale theft of everything not tied down, and a lot that is, but missiles, mortars and murder raining down from the sky.

CAN ANYBODY READING THIS NEWSLETTER IMAGINE LIVING IN A TOWN WHERE 70 ROCKETS AND MORTAR SHELLS FELL IN ONE DAY?! BECAUSE THAT'S WHAT'S HAPPENING IN SDEROT. UNBELIEVABLE!!

Which is what we will get the minute we give up control of the West Bank to Fatah, who will lose it in 20 minutes to Hamas. But then the rockets and missiles will be down on Netanya, the airport, and Ein Karem. Not just the western Negev. And of course the whole country worries what to do about it when all the signs are that the government, prodded by the Americans, is getting cozier and cozier with Abu Mazen and Fatah. Does any rational person suppose that Fatah will protect us against Hamas? No indeed; we will have to deal with Hamas ourselves.

A) We have been killing the leaders and operators one by one and two by two over the past months, and that's good work! But that, however demoralizing for them, hasn't stopped the rockets flying.

B) The government knows it can't carpet bomb Gaza in retaliation for the rockets because it's illegal to harm civilian populations.

C) We can't just go in and "clean out" the sewer which is Gaza because we don't intend to re-occupy the Gaza Strip forever. We need to leave sooner or later. We need an exit plan: what happens when we leave? The answer is that things go right back to where they were before.

So there is a growing consensus (which I share) that the only thing to do is create a situation where the Hamas government in Gaza stops wanting to do us harm. How does one accomplish that? By pointing out the catastrophe that follows continued aggression. By doing what? By absolutely closing the borders to truck traffic, stopping deliveries, imports and exports, cutting water supplies, electricity, petrol and cooking gas. Just for one day to make the point: this is what is going to happen.

That is not collective punishment but only a sanction, which stops as soon as the shooting stops. The people of Gaza and their gov-

ernment will see the collapse of Gaza right before their eyes. They may be religious fanatics, but they are not suicidal. So they perforce decide to stop.

That's the logic, and I buy into it. Trouble is the government doesn't. Because to do so would be to recognize Hamas as the government of Gaza (which it surely is) whereas the Israeli government, and the Americans, the EU, etc, are still committed to One Palestine under the control of Abu Mazen in Ramallah. We can't deal with Gaza separately, reality be damned. Reminds me of the long-time American policy vis-à-vis Taiwan. I never understood that one either.

Unless we go that way: dealing with the Hamas government in Gaza as a separate entity, and a hostile one at that—even at the risk of getting everybody else in the world mad—we are, in my opinion, never going to create a stable relationship between us and the Palestinians.

And they are still trying to kill us although you'd never know that from the BBC

Now that our cable service is no longer providing us with CNN, we are stuck with FOX (for American crimes, murders, kidnappings, and election primaries), SKY (mostly English local news), and France 24 (an agreeable headlines/features service in English, mostly about France & Europe). And the BBC for serious coverage. The BBC is ok, actually, EXCEPT when it concerns us, Israel and the Palestinians.

I don't pretend to understand the mechanisms by which certain things make the world news and others are ignored. The other day (January 18th) for example, the BBC World News headlined with the report that Israel had destroyed an abandoned building in Gaza and one woman had been killed. Lights, camera & action! But the story that 70 rockets and mortars rained down on Sderot 3 days previously NEVER made it into the news. They never showed it and never referred to it. Do they think, as the rest of the world probably does too, that just because we have suffered fewer fatalities over the past months/years that the Arabs are making their peace with our existence and stopping trying to kill us? It would be sad if that were the case, because it's not true.

Some statistics

American network news is usually local and provincial. No complaints; local news is what interests most of the people most of the time. No reason why NBC, for example, should understand (or much care) about the nuances of international stories. It's not equipped to do so. So it depends on the agencies, which have their own agendas. Just in case your local news providers didn't let you know about this, here is part of the government report on Palestinian terrorism against Israel in 2007.

TERROR ATTACKS: 2946

KASSAM ROCKETS: 475 missiles and 631 mortar shells fired at Sderot and the western Negev from mid-June 2007 (when Hamas took over the Gaza Strip) to the end of December.

ISRAELIS KILLED: 13

SUICIDE BOMBINGS: 1 (as compared to 6 in 2006 and 60 in 2002)

2946 attacks in one year, nearly all foiled. What this means is that the Palestinians have by no means given up their campaign to do us damage but that the Security Forces have been really great at stopping them before they happen. No illusions, everyone; we are still a long way from peace.

But now it looks like they have taken my advice

Can't take credit for it, because the government hasn't asked my advice for some time now. But since writing the above paragraphs, I see that they have begun to close down the Gaza Strip, doing exactly what I suggested: cutting down gas and oil, trade and traffic, food, medicine, etc.

As of now, the battle changes character. It is now a battle of PUBLIC RELATIONS. The Palestinians are already broadcasting pictures of Gaza in brown-out, of women crying (they're good at that), claiming 5 people dead because of no medicine, etc. The Israelis say they are monitoring the situation, that there is no humanitarian crisis in Gaza, no shortage of food & medicine (yet), that Gaza produces 25% of its own electricity anyhow (so the brown-out shown last night was staged), that Egypt is helping, that there are hundreds of tunnels which can be used for supplies and not only for explosives, etc., etc.

Now the question is two-fold

a) whether this pressure will persuade the people of Gaza to demand changes from their Hamas government, to lay off of Sderot and ease their own misery, and

b) whether the Israel Foreign Ministry—never known for good PR—will really manage to make a convincing case for world opinion. It will be interesting to follow both these aspects of the conflict. Anybody want to take bets on which side the world is going to believe? ■