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No end in sight

In Hamas, Israel faces an adversary that lacks a realistic strategy – and it has no good options of its own. Historian *Lawrence Freedman* on the strategic dilemmas of a conflict in which every battle has left the underlying issues unresolved

At times of war the art of strategy is to align military means with political ends. However competent the armed forces and brilliant their tactics, if they cannot reach the desired objective then something has to give: the objective must be made more realistic or more means must be found. If neither is possible the result will be frustration, disillusion or even worse.

At the start of a war, objectives may be set without obvious limit, especially by an aggrieved party seeking to regain what is rightfully theirs or determined to punish a cruel enemy. But what can be achieved depends also on the aims of that enemy and what they can bring to the fight. This challenge of military strategy has become painfully apparent as Israel responds to last weekend's horrific attacks. It can see no way of negotiating with Hamas and so now wants to defeat it by force of arms, but if it cannot find a way to do so then the cycle of violence will continue.

This need to align ends with means can be seen in the various wars fought by western armed forces in the decades following the end of the cold war, a period in which they enjoyed relative superiority. The US and its allies successfully liberated Kuwait from Iraqi occupation in 1991, carefully avoiding driving to Baghdad to overthrow Saddam Hussein, although leaving him in power meant that he continued to cause trouble. The humanitarian interventions in the former Yugoslavia by western forces were simpler. They were acting in support of a beleaguered people and seeking to deal with the militias that had been oppressing them. In Kosovo in 1999 they confined themselves to using air power.

But then at the start of the century there were the quick operations to effect

Above: smoke rising from Gaza City seen through the broken security fence at Kfar Aza on Tuesday, which was attacked by Hamas militants last Saturday

Below: leaders signing maps as part of the Oslo Accords in 1995 at the White House; Israeli soldiers survey the surrounding country during the six-day war in June 1967

Sergey Ponomarev/New York Times/Redux/Eyevine; Polaris; Vittorioano Rastelli/Corbis



regime change in Afghanistan, removing the Taliban to get at al-Qaeda, and then in Iraq, to topple Hussein. In both cases the conventional battles were relatively straightforward, but then these were followed by long and bruising counter-insurgency campaigns, in which coalition forces were stuck because the governments they helped form were unable to cope without continuing western assistance.

The forms of warfare involved in these operations varied enormously, in their intensity and human costs. The core lessons were that it was extremely difficult to fight in places where you were not welcome and that if conditions are against you, perseverance is not enough. You have to get the politics right. This question of the relationship between military means and political ends is posed daily in the Russo-Ukraine war, as Vladimir Putin refuses to abandon a war that he can no longer win, while Ukraine believes that it has no choice but to continue to fight to liberate all its territory, even as the war becomes more attritional and exhausting.

And now, over this past week, since the Hamas assault on southern Israel, this question is posed again, in a place where it has been posed many times before. What is it that either side can hope to achieve in this current bout of fighting when every previous bout has left the underlying conflict unresolved?

Suppose that last Saturday Hamas had contented itself with attacking Israeli border posts, killing those that resisted and taking as many army personnel as possible back into Gaza as hostages. From spectators there would have been grudging admiration for its audacity, the ability to maintain operational security and deceive Israeli intelligence, and orchestrating rocket attacks with troop infiltration. The Israeli govern-

ment would have been left embarrassed because it had been caught by surprise, and because a fixation with the West Bank and Jerusalem meant that it was unprepared to cope with Hamas's fighters as they poured through breaches in the fence. The Gazan people would have faced air strikes, as they often do, but Israel would have had limited international support.

The story would have been one of an underdog fighting back and showing up the weakness of its oppressor. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu might have had to hand the problem over to mediators, ending up agreeing to swap Palestinians held in Israeli prisons for IDF personnel seized by Hamas's troops.

But that is not how it worked out. One Hamas official said that when they got into southern Israel they were surprised by the IDF's weak response: "We were planning to make some gains and take prisoners to exchange them. This army was a paper tiger." It would be granting too much to Hamas to assume that it had no interest in murdering local civilians and no plans to do so. But with the IDF absent there was nothing to prevent them going on a rampage, moving into nearby towns and villages, shooting whoever they found and breaking into houses to kill residents.

The greatest carnage took place at an outdoor festival where 3,500 young people were dancing. The slaughtered civilians, and those taken hostage, were not only Israelis but people of many nations, and all age groups, from pensioners to young children. Appalled at the terrible scenes, those that would have simply blamed Israel for its neglect of Palestinian suffering now condemned Hamas for its brutality. Little was said internationally as the inevitable air strikes pounded targets in Gaza.

Even as Hamas's leadership celebrated the success of its plan, developed over many months, and the hurt it had caused its enemy, it found that it had no strategy for its next step for it had gone too far with its first. The hostages provided its only leverage but to what purpose? It threatened executions to get the Israelis to hold back its air strikes, but that so far has made no difference. Posting images of more helpless people being executed is not going to soften its

image. The alternative is to make a deal. Plenty of countries may offer themselves as mediators, but what might Hamas want in return for the release of the hostages? Release of its own prisoners and the cessation of military action? The most that is on offer is restoring electricity, fuel and water. No Israeli government could agree to anything that appeared to reward Hamas.

More seriously, while Hamas has agreed in the past to ceasefires and to accepting the possibility of a two-state solution if Israel returned to its pre-1967 borders, it refuses to acknowledge the permanence of the "Zionist entity". Its aim is the elimination of the Israeli state. It may appreciate Israel's durability and resilience more now than it did in the past, and be ready, through intermediaries, to make side deals, but it lacks a political strategy for addressing the conflict over the long term. It

Occupying Gaza for an indefinite period would be more than the IDF could manage

already controls its own territory. Its problem is not that its land is occupied but that Israel, and for that matter Egypt, exercise tight and restrictive control over what goes in and out.

Gaza is one of two distinct Palestinian territories, with different histories and political structures, which are not linked geographically. Both were acquired by Israel in June 1967 despite neither being an objective when that war started – an unusual example of the gains of a war exceeding expectations. From the start it was unclear why Israel would want to be in charge of a territory largely consisting of refugee camps. The Israeli presence in Gaza was always difficult to sustain and it ended altogether in 2005 when the settlers were told to leave and Israel put up a fence instead.

The move into the West Bank of Jordan and East Jerusalem in 1967 was also unplanned. Israel had hoped to persuade King Hussein of Jordan not to join the war in support of Egypt. An early

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Arts

Inside the entrance of the Hangar-Biccocca's vast exhibition space in Milan stands a shimmering golden pillar that rises 21 metres. Like an industrial chimney given an alchemically glamorous makeover of gold leaf, and so tall it seems almost to disappear into the building's lofty black ceiling, this sight brings other sensational monuments to mind. The Lighthouse of Alexandria, perhaps; the Colossus of Rhodes; the Tower of Babel – where man endeavours to move closer to heaven.

Called "The Golden Tower", this one was created by the late American artist James Lee Byars in 1990 for an exhibition at the Gropius Bau in Berlin. "He wanted to place it on the border between East and West Berlin," says Gordon VeneKlasen, director of Michael Werner gallery, which looks after the artist's estate. "He believed in unification through beauty." Here it marks the start of a journey through the work of an artist who sought sublime perfection, who posed rather than answered questions (he collected all manner of interrogative phrases, not declarative statements) and deliberated on death.

Byars, who was born in Detroit in 1932 and died in Cairo in 1997, tended to think big. "His demands," says VeneKlasen, who knew him well, "were always extreme." Unrealised projects included sending a rocket to Mars in 1969 and inviting Michael Jackson to perform at an exhibition in Porto in 1995.

If these came to nothing, then Byars did pull off some feats of performance. In Venice in 1975, for example, he unfurled a 100-metre sheet of white cotton, like a human silhouette, and held it aloft with the spontaneous help of hundreds of tourists milling through St Mark's Square. His most sustained event, though, was himself. Dressed in all black, white, pink or gold, always in a wide-brimmed hat and often with a blindfold – a symbol of his clairvoyance – Byars lived every day as an artist performing an artwork. Fuelled by both conviction and narcissism, "the art was an act of generosity", says VeneKlasen, who is showing some of Byars's work at Michael Werner's London gallery.

As his career progressed, Byars turned this sense of scale to the making of heroic objects, many of which were used in his performances. He liked his art to be fleeting but leave more than a vapour trail. At the HangarBiccocca, in



Outsize ambitions

Exhibition | A show at HangarBiccocca captures the spirit of artist James

Lee Byars who wanted to send a rocket to Mars in 1969. By *Caroline Roux*

the space where locomotives used to be made, a narwhal tusk on a table lies on a bed of lusciously piled silk like an elaborate coffin lining; a gilded hemisphere makes itself into a sphere by its own reflection in a black lacquered plinth; a ball of 3,333 fresh red roses gradually fades away. All are evocations of human mortality, of passing from life to death. A huge swath of gold fabric – half solid, half fringed – falls down a wall and pools on the floor. In a black silk tent, a 19th-century chair on wheels,

Left to right: "The Golden Tower" (1990); "The Rose Table of Perfect" (1989); Byars wears a gold suit in front of "The Door of Innocence" (1986-87) in Turin in 1989

Agostino Osio; Elio Montanari

upholstered in gold brocade and once occupied by Byars, sits on a gold carpet. The artist is both present and absent.

"I have tried to reveal his spirit," says Vicente Todolí, who was director at Tate Modern from 2002 to 2010 and has been the HangarBiccocca's artistic director since 2012. (The not-for-profit is funded by tyre company Pirelli.) He is well placed to do so: Todolí worked with Byars on two shows in Spain in the 1990s, though the artist died before the second, held in the Liberty-style villa at

the Serralves in Porto, was complete.

"The fact that he wasn't there when the show opened felt like a continuation of the elusive quality he'd had while he was alive," says Todolí. Despite being severely ill with cancer, Byars directed the creation of a huge black goat-hair carpet right to the end.

Byars spent his life in a panoply of places. He left the US for Japan in 1957 and lived in Kyoto on and off for 10 years. Like other countercultural Americans, it was a way of escaping his country's self-absorption and single-minded focus on progress. In Japan he found a culture awash with the ritual and ceremony that went on to underpin every part of his work. (Noh theatre gave him those gold suits.)

Back in the US, though his performances chimed with other groups such as Fluxus, Byars didn't fit the dominant taste that defined art as Abstract Expressionism, Minimalism and so on, and found greater recognition in Europe. He lived in Bern, Berlin and Antwerp, though Venice meant the most to him. "It was the city that

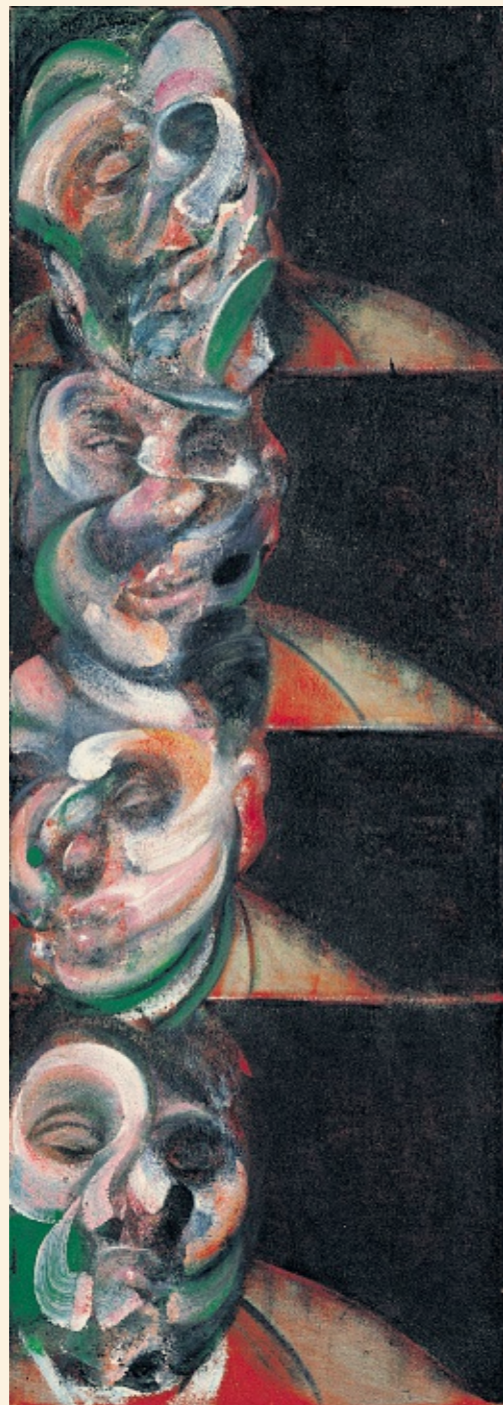
brought the Orient to the west," says Todolí. "And he respected that history and coexistence."

Now his influence can be felt in many corners of contemporary art practice. "Marina Abramović considers him a hero," says VeneKlasen. "She describes him as making a space for her."

Echoes of both Venice and Japan run through the exhibition at HangarBiccocca. It is there in Byars' elaborate use of gold as a symbol of purity and power and for its own elusive quality of seeming to dematerialise in the light. And it is there in the final work – a baroque arrangement on the rough concrete floor of a thousand balls of deep red Murano glass, each blown with a single breath. A fabulous synthesis of Japanese calligraphy and European design, transmitting tiny points of brilliant red light on the concrete, its title is "The Red Angel of Marseille".

In its encapsulation of absolute beauty and perfection, you could call it the lifeblood of James Lee Byars.

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