

Amid the horrific bloodshed soaking the Middle East, two Why we're on the

By PETER HITCHENS

ALMOST everything you think you know about the Middle East is untrue. For anyone who knows the region's geography and history, the nightly news bulletins are a torture to watch, with their soppy editorialising about "peace" and their depiction of Arabs and Israelis as squabbling children in need of a clip around the ear from wise Western world statesmen.

Those world statesmen are not much better. In normal life, it is a sign of being unhinged if you do the same thing over and over again and expect to get a different result. But in the business of Middle East diplomacy, such behaviour could earn you a Nobel Peace Prize.

Since 1978, Israel has been urged to give up a little more land in return for a promise of peace which always seems to evaporate. The land, however, has gone for good.

The whole logic of the argument is odd and hypocritical. The United States, a vast territorial empire with harmless neighbours to north and south and huge oceans to east and west, urges Israel, one third the size of the single state of Florida and with foes on every hand, to give up "land for peace".

The phrase "land for peace" is interesting in itself. It is actually another way of describing the appeasement forced on Czechoslovakia by her supposed friends in 1938. This was also supposed to promise peace, but in fact made the country impossible to defend and opened the gates for an invasion a few months later.

Those responsible for this cowardly stupidity are still reviled 60 years on. Those who urge it on Israel in the present day are praised.

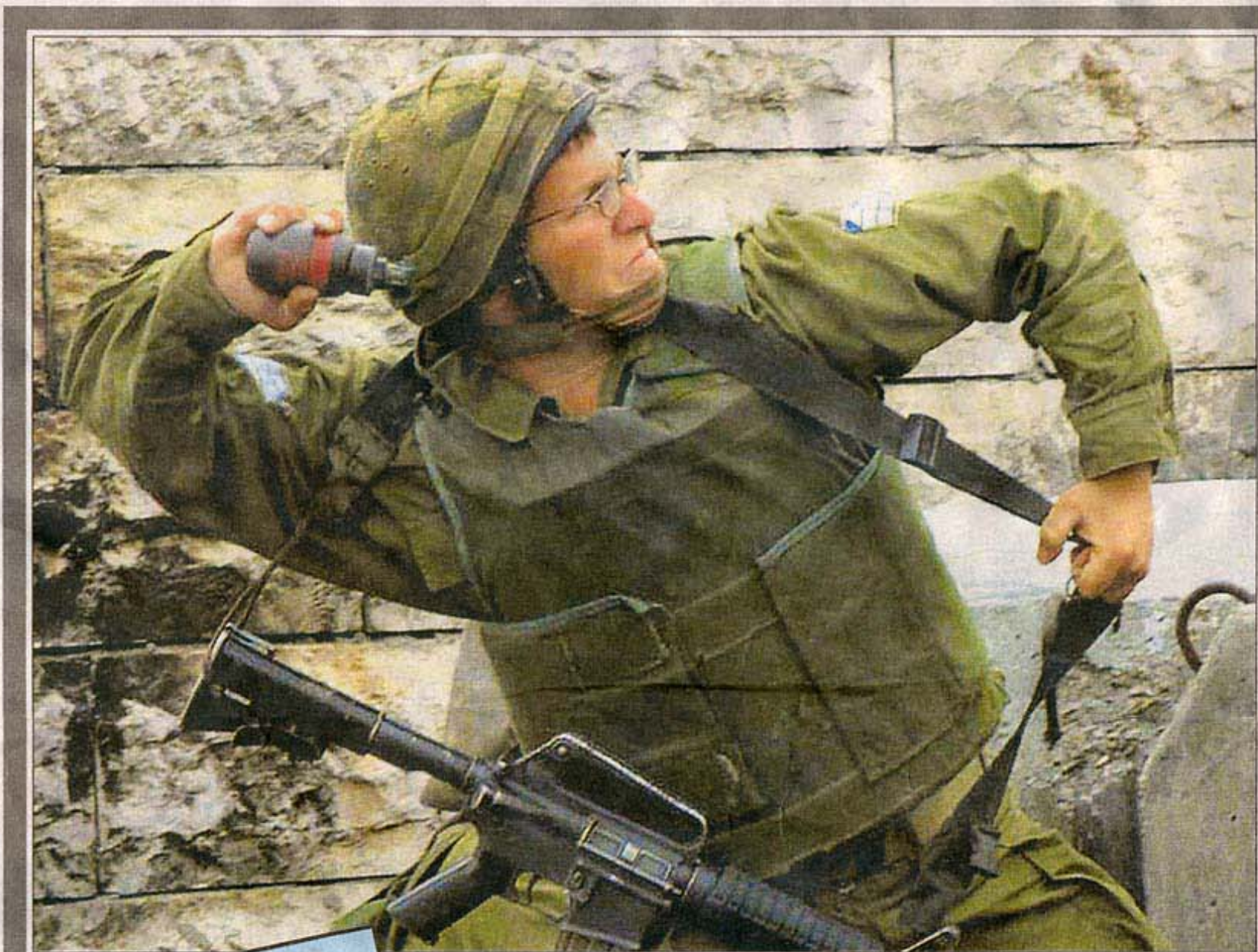
Look at a map. Israel and the Occupied Territories fit comfortably inside southeast Queensland, with plenty of space to spare. Then look at the absurd shape of it. Any general asked to defend such a country would groan with despair.

At one point, between Qalqilya and the Mediterranean, it is so narrow that a tank could cross it in 18 minutes and a jet bomber in 18 seconds. Its only international airport is within easy rocket range of potentially hostile territory. So are its capital and its main highway.

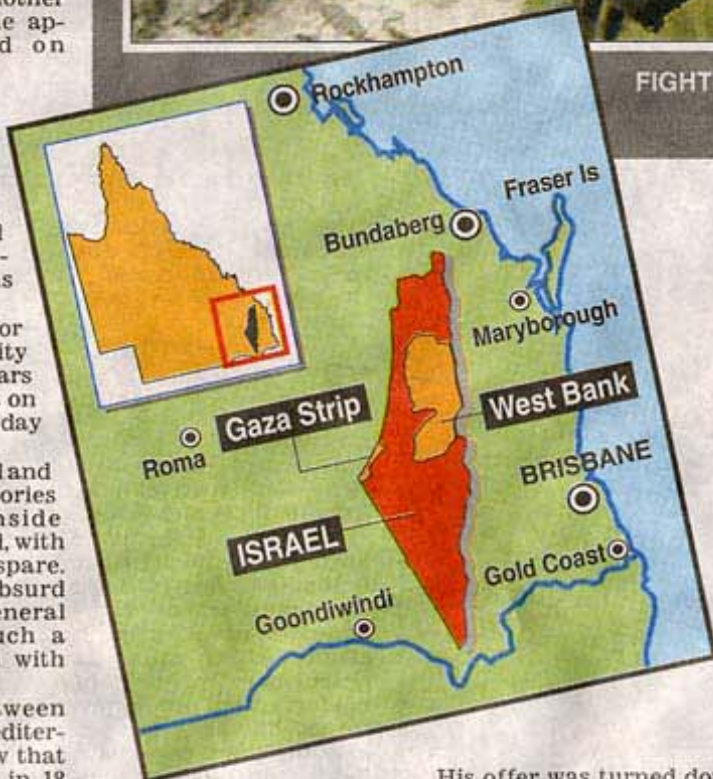
Within living memory it has three times been the target of invasions from its neighbours, in 1948, 1967 and 1973. During the Gulf War it was bombarded with Iraqi Scud missiles.

You might pardon its inhabitants for being a little nervous about security.

The astonishing thing is



FIGHTING FORCE: An Israeli soldier throws a stun grenade at Palestinians in Hebron (above); and how Israel compares in size to Queensland (left)



that so many Israelis, despite this danger, have sought peace with their neighbours based on a trust they have no reason to feel.

Almost the entire Israeli media, the country's largest political party and most of its academics and artists campaign constantly for their own state to make risky concessions.

The last Left leader, Ehud Barak, was prepared to present half of Jerusalem to Arab control two years ago.

His offer was turned down. He also sought to give back the Golan Heights to Syria, but was rebuffed.

This militarily vital piece of ground was originally part of the League of Nations mandate of Palestine when its borders were fixed in 1920. It was then handed over by Britain in a deal with the French, who controlled Syria, in 1923.

Israel captured it in bloody fighting in 1967. In the same year Israel conquered the famous Occupied Territories, which are now supposed to be

turned into a Palestinian state alongside Israel.

You might think Israel had seized them illegally from their rightful owner. This is not true. They were grabbed by armed force, together with the eastern and holiest part of Jerusalem, by the country then known as Transjordan in 1948.

Transjordan ethnically cleansed all Jews from this land and from its sector of Jerusalem, and promptly renamed itself "Jordan".

During its 19 years of Jordanian rule, the area was never described as "occupied territory". At that time there were no demands for independence from the Palestinian people. The Gaza strip was gobbled up by Egypt in the same year, to a chorus of silence from the world protest industry.

Israel has many blots on its past and is not a perfect society.

During the 1948 war there is little doubt that Israelis drove some Arabs from their homes, though the Arab radio stations were also urging them to flee to give Arab invading armies a clear run.

Israel is not some kind of crude oppressor. It has a

million Arab citizens with full civil and voting rights, except that they do not have to serve in the army. The arrangement is not perfect - but no Arab country gives such rights to Jews, if it even permits them to live in its borders.

Then there are the "refugees" in their squalid townships.

Why are they still there?

About 650,000 Arabs fled from what is now Israel in 1948. There are now about 5 million officially classified refugees. Almost \$5 billion has been spent by the UN on housing and feeding them, mostly supplied by Western nations.

Most of the Arab states refuse to grant them citizenship or to pay towards their maintenance. They have an interest in preventing this weeping sore from ever healing, since the refugees' plight is excellent anti-Israel propaganda.

They still promote the idea that they may one day return to their lost homes. If they did so, Israel would cease to exist, its Jews a minority in an Arab state.

Compare the Palestinians with the 12 million Germans expelled from Poland, Czechoslovakia, Russia, Hungary and Rom-

ania after World War II. All have long ago been absorbed into Germany, and few seriously dream of returning to their lost homes.

None of the supposed efforts for "peace" has managed to achieve the civilised resettlement of Arab refugees in Arab countries.

Why not, since they share a religion, language and culture with the whole of the vast Arab world, and might have benefited from some of that Arab world's huge oil wealth?

A new Marshall Plan could resettle the refugees in a matter of years throughout the area in peace and comfort.

Their politically impossible "right of return" could be bargained away. Joint, unhindered access to Jerusalem's holy places could be agreed by treaty.

By similar resolve in the Cold War, the free nations of the world persuaded a mighty communist power to reform itself and abandon its support for aggression and terror.

It can be done, but only if we have the will and the understanding, and see beyond the oversimplified images of tank and slingshot, suicide bomber and soldier, to the real problem.