

{NOVEMBER 27 2004}

# “GIVE ME SOME CREDIT”

---

**G**ive me some credit!” the new Israeli Prime Minister, Levi Eshkol, cried out at the Labor Party convention in February 1965, addressing David Ben-Gurion.

From the moment he resigned, Ben-Gurion started to undermine his successor. Eshkol, who until then had only dealt with finances, looked pale and ineffectual next to his monumental predecessor, the Father of the State, the leader in two wars.

Eshkol meant his words quite literally. He said: “Ben-Gurion, I shall use the language of a treasurer: Give me some credit! That’s all I ask, for one term in office, four years at most!”

The dramatic cry did not help. Ben-Gurion left the party and continued to rain fire and brimstone on Eshkol.

Abu Mazen finds himself in a similar situation today. He, too, could cry out: “Give me some credit!”

Of course, his great predecessor cannot attack him except indirectly, by way of his legacy. But Abu Mazen has enough opponents in his own Fatah party.

Television presents this as a personal fight between him and the middle generation, in particular Marwan Barghouti. That lies in the nature of television. Since the small screen is at its best when it shows a human face, but is unable to show ideas, every controversy becomes a matter of personalities (confirming, by the way, the famous dictum of the Canadian thinker, Marshall McLuhan, “the medium is the message” - meaning that reality is shaped by the character of the media.)

Naturally, the Abu Mazen-Barghouti controversy does partly reflect a personal and generational confrontation. Abu Mazen represents the Fatah Old Guard, while his opponents represent the fighters of the first and second intifadas. But the real confrontation is between two world views and two grand strategies for the Palestinian national liberation struggle.

I heard the name Abu Mazen for the first time in 1974, when I established contact

## **AVNERY | "GIVE ME SOME CREDIT"**

with the PLO leadership. I asked my first partner, Sa'id Hamami, the peace martyr, to tell me who was standing behind him. He informed me, in confidence, that Fatah had set up a three-member committee to direct contacts with Israelis. I called them the "Three Abus" - Abu Amar (Yasser Arafat), Abu Mazen (Mahmud Abbas) and Abu Iyad (Salah Khalaf).

Among the three, Abu Mazen was directly in charge of Israeli affairs. His doctoral thesis at Moscow University was about the Zionist movement's activities during the Holocaust, and once I was even asked to bring him books about the Kastner affair (the negotiations between the Zionist Rescue Committee and Adolf Eichmann in 1944).

I met him for the first time face to face when a delegation of the Israeli Council for Israeli-Palestinian Peace (General Matti Peled, former Treasury Director Ya'acov Arnon and I) was invited to meet Arafat in Tunis in January 1983. Before the meeting, we spoke with Abu Mazen, as in all the subsequent meetings in Tunis: we always discussed our ideas first with Abu Mazen and then brought our proposals to Arafat, who spoke the final word.

This experience helps me to understand Abu Mazen's approach nowadays. His strategy goes like this: the main Palestinian effort must be directed towards the United States and the Israeli public. There is now an opportunity to change the one-sided policy of President Bush. During his second term of office he can ignore the powerful Jewish lobby, since he cannot be elected again anyhow.

Israeli public opinion, too, can be changed. For this, the armed intifada must be stopped. In Abu Mazen's view, it has brought no benefits to the Palestinians, but rather hurt their cause.

Most of the young Fatah generation rejects this view out of hand. They believe that it is based on illusions. Bush is under the influence of Sharon and, anyhow, he is one of the Christian fundamentalists who support the most extreme right-wing in Israel. Also, it makes no sense to rely on the Israeli Peace Camp, which has forsaken the Palestinians in their hour of dire need. Except for some small groups, they have done nothing to end the brutal occupation, the killing, the destruction and starving out, the choking separation wall and the expropriation of land and water. All it does is issue papers that have no effect whatsoever. The armed actions, the young Fatah activists believe, do bear fruit. They have hit the Israeli economy hard. They have created an atmosphere of fear and a reality of poverty. They have produced a readiness to give up the Palestinian territories. The Israelis understand only the language of force.

A more moderate variant of this attitude proposes intensifying attacks on settlers and soldiers, but stopping the attacks on civilians in Israel proper. Meaning: the suicide bombings.

## **AVNERY | "GIVE ME SOME CREDIT"**

While Arafat was alive, the controversy did not get out of hand, because Arafat, as was his wont, created a synthesis between the two approaches. He used - alternately or simultaneously - diplomacy and violence, according to the changing situation. The adherents of both strategies saw him as their leader. And, indeed, Arafat led the strategy of recognizing Israel and seeking peace with it, as in Oslo. But when he came to the conclusion that this effort had run into an Israeli wall, he used violence. Marwan Barghouti was his pupil.

Now Arafat is gone. The two strategies clash in the Palestinian society, and perhaps in every Palestinian home.

One thing must be clear: the debate about strategy does not reflect a divergence of aims. All Fatah factions are united around the aims laid down by Arafat: a Palestinian state, the pre-1967 borders (with some possible exchange of territories), East Jerusalem as the capital of Palestine, sovereignty over the temple Mount, evacuation of the settlements, an agreed solution to the refugee problem. There is no argument about these.

So how will the controversy be settled?

It will not be easy for the wearers of suits to overcome the bearers of Kalashnikovs, who put their lives on the line every day. But the Palestinians will use their intelligence. They may well ask themselves: Abu Mazen wants credit? Let's give him credit. He believes that he can extract concessions from Bush and Sharon? Why not give him a chance?

Let him try to achieve an end to "targeted liquidations", "verification of killing", demolition of homes, degradation at the checkpoints. Let him try to get meaningful peace negotiations started. Let's see if Bush offers him more than empty phrases.

The first time, when the Americans pressured the Palestinians into appointing Abu Mazen Prime Minister, he got nothing. Sharon stuck a knife in his back. Bush ignored him..

If he can really achieve something this time - so much the better. If not, the Kalashnikovs will speak again. That is the background of Marwan Barghouti's decision not to run this time.

Every credit expires sometime. Half a year? A year? Certainly no more. Abu Mazen has already promised Barghouti to hold elections inside Fatah within nine months.

If the credit bears no interest, the Third Intifada will surely follow.