

{JUNE 18, 2005}

# RED HERRING

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**T**he experience was almost surrealistic: I was in a hall in the centre of Gaza, facing some 500 people, all of them bearded men, nearly all of them Hamas militants. The Hamas movement officially opposes the very existence of the State of Israel, and here I stand on the podium speaking in Hebrew about peace between Israel and the future State of Palestine. Did they protest? On the contrary, they applauded, and after the event I was invited to lunch with the respected sheikhs.

That was in 1994, and perhaps the background requires some explanation: a year before, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin decided to expel from the country 415 Islamic activists. The Chief-of-Staff, Ehud Barak, testified in court that this measure was absolutely essential for the security of the state. The Supreme Court confirmed the expulsion. The activists were taken by bus to the northern border, but the Beirut government did not allow them to be deported into Lebanon. For a whole year, the expellees vegetated in tents in an open field between the two armies, exposed to the rain and the cold in winter and to the burning sun in summer, until they were finally allowed to return.

I considered the expulsion a grievous violation of human rights, as well as politically foolish. So I proposed, in a “Peace Now” meeting, the setting up of a protest tent in front of the Prime Minister’s office. The leaders of Peace Now did not agree with protesting against an act of the Labor Party leader. But some other peace activists combined to set up the tent, together with leaders of the Arab community in Israel, both religious and secular.

We spent 45 days and nights together. Some days, snow was falling and the cold was bitter. Bedouins from the Negev and activists from Arab villages brought us food and coal-burners, women-activists from Jerusalem brought us a large kettle of warm soup every evening. Owing to our profound disappointment with Peace Now we decided there and then to found a new peace movement. That’s how Gush Shalom came into being.

I was curious how the Islamic militants would behave towards us upon their return. I was very pleased when they decided to express their gratitude publicly: together with my friends, the tent dwellers, I was invited to that event in Gaza. There I met several of the people who are now leading Hamas, after the assassinations of Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, who was in prison at the time, and Abd-al-Aziz al-Rantisi, who was one of the expellees.

I remembered this experience when I heard that at tomorrow's meeting with Condoleezza Rice, Ariel Sharon will demand that the Americans refuse all contact with Hamas representatives who are running for office in the coming Palestinian elections. Official spokesmen also expressed their anger at the decision of the EU to allow diplomats "beneath the rank of ambassador" to meet with them.

Sharon now demands the exclusion of Hamas from the elections, as long as they do not officially recognize the State of Israel and abjure terrorism. More than that: he has already declared that there will be no peace negotiations until the Palestinian Authority destroys the "terror infrastructure" (meaning: Hamas) and disarms it.

That, too, reminds one of something. For years, successive Israeli governments had demanded that all the world boycott the PLO, until it abolishes the "Palestinian National Charter". This document, dating from the 60s, called for the dismantling of the State of Israel. Later, the PLO adopted many new resolutions that negated the Charter and recognized Israel. In the 1993 Oslo agreement Yasser Arafat gave up 78% of the country of Palestine that existed until 1948. But nothing helped. For many years, Israeli propaganda was riding on the miserable Charter in order to justify an extreme anti-Palestinian policy, until the Palestinians - much to the chagrin of many Israelis - abolished it altogether.

That created a vacuum. Sharon is now using Hamas to fill it.

One of the more colorful idioms of the English language is "red herring". That is a smoked herring (the red color is imparted to it in the process of smoke-curing) that has a strong smell. A person being chased by dogs draws it across his path in order to distract the animals so they lose the trail.

Much as his predecessors used the PLO Charter, Sharon is now using Hamas to distract attention from his promise to immediately dismantle the settlement "outposts", freeze the settlements and start political negotiations with the Palestinians. He draws the herring across the Road Map.

As for the matter itself: Is the participation of Hamas in the elections a good or a bad thing, as far as Israeli interests are concerned?

I say that it's a good thing. Some 30 years ago, I called for negotiations with the PLO, which was then considered a terror-gang and a bunch of murderers. At the time we

coined the phrase: “Peace is made between enemies”. Today that applies to Hamas, too.

There is no doubt that Hamas is about to win a significant share of the vote in the parliamentary election, after it achieved excellent results in the recent municipal elections. It does not get these votes because it refuses to recognize Israel. Rather, there are two main reasons for its success: the prestige it has acquired for valiantly fighting against the Israeli occupation and its being untouched by the corruption that marks some of the other personalities and factions.

The Palestinians consider the violence, which is usually referred to in Israel as “terrorism”, to be legitimate resistance. They believe that Israel would not have decided to leave the Gaza Strip if not for the armed struggle, since Israel, according to their belief and experience, “understands only the language of force”. Until now, no one can point to a single achievement of the Palestinians that was attained by any other means.

It is an irony of fate (or a triumph of folly) that Hamas was created, in fact, with the help of Israel itself. Much as the Americans created the al-Qaeda of Osama bin-Laden in order to fight against the Soviet army in Afghanistan, Israel supported the Islamic movement in the occupied territories as a counterweight to the PLO. The assumption was that pious Muslims would spend their time praying in the mosques and would not support the secular PLO, which was then considered the arch-enemy. But when the first intifada broke out at the end of 1987, the Islamists organized as Hamas (the Arabic initials of “Islamic Resistance Movement”) and quickly became the most efficient underground fighting organization. However, the Security Service started to act against them only after a whole year of the intifada had passed.

Now the existence of Hamas is an accomplished fact. It has deep roots in the community, also because of its widespread social services which were initially financed by the Saudis and others.

Historical experience shows that such movements tend to become more moderate as they are integrated in the political system. A movement that has ministers in the cabinet, a faction in Parliament and mayors in towns and villages, acquires an interest in stability. True, in the beginning it may cause a radicalization of the style of the Palestinian National Authority, but in the long run it will make the achievement of a settlement much easier.

If one wants a real peace that will be accepted by the whole Palestinian public, one should bless the integration of Hamas in the Palestinian political system. But if one wants to obstruct peace in order to annex most of the West Bank to Israel and preserve the settlements, it is logical that one opposes it – as Sharon does.

Condoleezza Rice certainly knows a smoked herring when she smells one – and not only on her breakfast table.