

{MARCH 20 2004}

THREE GENERALS, ONE MARTYR

Five hundred black- and white-bearded Hamas members were sitting opposite me. Venerable sheikhs and young people. On the side, some rows were occupied by women. I was standing on the stage, talking in Hebrew, with the crossed flags of Israel and Palestine on my lapel.

As I have recounted already several times, it happened like this: at the end of 1992, the new Prime Minister, Yitzhaq Rabin, expelled 415 Islamic activists – mostly Hamas members – to the Lebanese border area. In protest, we put up tents opposite the Prime Minister's office in Jerusalem. There we spent 45 days and nights – Israeli peace activists (who were later to found Gush Shalom) and Arab citizens of Israel, mostly members of the Islamic movement. Most of the time it was very cold, and some days our tents were covered with snow. There was a lot of debate in the tents, the Jews learning something about Islam and the Muslims something about Judaism.

The expelled militants themselves vegetated for a year in the hilly landscape, between the Israeli and Lebanese armies. The whole world followed their suffering. After a year they were allowed back, and the Hamas leaders in Gaza organized a homecoming reception for them in the biggest hall in town. They invited those Israelis who had protested against the expulsion. I was asked to make a speech. I spoke about peace, and in the intermission we were invited to have lunch with the hosts. I was impressed by the friendly attitude of the hundreds of people who were there.

Undoubtedly, Sheikh Ahmed Yassin and the spokesman of the expellees, Dr. Abd-al-Aziz al-Rantissi (who became Sheikh Yassin's successor last week) would have been present, too, if they had not been kept in prison.

I recount this experience in order to point out that the picture of Hamas as an inveterate enemy of all peace and compromise is not accurate. Of course, 10 years of bloodshed, suicide bombings and targeted assassinations have passed since then. But even now, the picture is much more complex than meets the eye.

There are different tendencies in Hamas. The ideological hard core does indeed refuse any peace or compromise with Israel. They consider it a foreign implantation in Palestine, which in Islamic doctrine is a Muslim "wakf" (religious grant). But many

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Hamas sympathizers do not treat the organization as an ideological center but rather as an instrument for fighting Israel in pursuit of realistic objectives.

Sheikh Yassin himself announced some months ago in a German paper that the fight would be discontinued after the establishment of a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders. Recently, he offered a “hudna” (truce) for 30 years. (Which strongly reminds one of Ariel Sharon’s suggestion that Israel would give up the Gaza Strip and retain large parts of the West Bank for an interim phase to last for 20 years.)

Therefore, the murder of the Sheikh did not serve any positive aim. It was an act of folly.

The three generals who actually direct the affairs of Israel – Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, Minister of Defense Sha’ul Mofaz and Chief-of-Staff Mosh Ya’alon – maintain that “in the short run” the assassination would indeed increase the attacks on Israeli citizens, but “in the long run” it would help to “rout terrorism”. They are very careful not to spell out when the “short run” ends and the “long run” begins. Our generals do not believe in timetables.

I take the liberty to tell these three illustrious strategists: Nonsense in tomato juice! (as you say in Hebrew slang). Or rather, nonsense in blood.

In the short run, this action endangers our personal security; in the long run it represents an even greater danger to our national security.

In the short run, it has increased the motivation for Hamas to carry out deadly attacks. Every Israeli understands this and is taking extra precautions these days. But the less obvious results are much more threatening.

In the hearts of hundreds of thousands of children in the Palestinian territories and the Arab countries, this murder has raised a storm of rage and thirst for revenge, together with feelings of frustration and humiliation in view of the impotence of the Arab world. This will produce not only thousands of new potential suicide bombers inside the country, but also tens of thousands of volunteers for the radical Islamic organizations throughout the Arab world. (I know, because at the age of 15 I joined the armed underground in similar circumstances.)

There is no stronger weapon for a fighting organization than a martyr. Suffice it to mention Avraham Stern, alias Ya’ir, who was killed by the British police in Tel-Aviv in 1942. His blood gave an impulse to the emergence of the Lehi underground (nicknamed “the Stern gang”) which only four years later was playing a major role in the expulsion of the British from Palestine.

But Ya’ir’s standing was nothing compared to the standing of Sheikh Yassin. The man was practically born to fulfil the role of a sainted martyr: a religious personality, a paraplegic in a wheelchair, broken in body but not in spirit, a militant who spent years

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in prison, a leader who continued his fight after miraculously surviving an earlier assassination attempt, a hero cowardly murdered from the air while leaving the mosque after prayer. Even a writer of genius could not have invented a figure more suited to the adoration of a billion Muslims, in this and coming generations.

The murder of Yassin will encourage cooperation among the Palestinian fighting organizations. Here, too, a parallel with the Hebrew underground presents itself. In a certain phase of the fight against the British, there was much unrest among the members of the Hagana, the semi-official underground army of the Zionist leadership (comparable to Fatah today). The Hagana (which included the elite Palmakh formation) was seen to be inactive, while the Irgun and Lehi appeared as heroes who carried out incredibly audacious actions. The ferment inside the Hagana caused the emergence of a group called “Fighting Nation” which advocated close cooperation between the various organizations. A number of Hagana members simply went over to Lehi.

Now it is happening among the Palestinians. The lines between the various groups are becoming more and more blurred. Al-Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigade members cooperate with Hamas and Jihad, contrary to the orders of their political leadership, saying that “since we are killed together, let us fight together”. This phenomenon is bound to grow and make the attacks more effective.

Hamas’ popularity among the population is rising sky-high, together with its capability to carry out attacks. This does not mean that the Palestinian public accepts the aim of an Islamic state or that it has given up the idea of a Palestinian state alongside Israel. Even among Hamas members, many embrace this idea. But the admiration of the masses for the attackers and their actions reflects the conviction that the Israelis understand only the language of force, and that experience proves that without extreme violence the Palestinians will not achieve anything at all.

Unfortunately, there is no real evidence for the opposite. The truth is that the Palestinians have never achieved anything without resorting to violence. Therefore the petitions being signed these days by well-meaning Palestinian personalities, calling for an end to the armed struggle, will have no effect. They cannot point to any other method that will sound convincing to their public. And our government always, without exception, presents such moves as a sign of weakness.

In the even longer run, the assassination of Yassin poses an existential danger. For five generations, the Israel-Palestinian conflict was essentially a national conflict – a clash between two great national movements, each of which claimed the country for itself. A national conflict is basically rational, it can be solved by compromise. This may be difficult, but it is possible. Our nightmare has always been that the national struggle

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would turn into a religious one. Since every religion claims to represent absolute truth, religious struggles do not allow for compromise.

The martyrdom of Sheikh Yassin pushes even further away the chance of Israel ever attaining peace and tranquility, normal relations with its neighbors, with a flourishing economy. It increases the danger that future generations of Arabs and Muslims will view it as a foreign implantation, installed in this region by force, with every decent Muslim, from Morocco to Indonesia, duty-bound to strive for its uprooting.

Such insights are far from the capability of our three generals to absorb. Sharon, Mofaz, Ya'alon and their ilk understand only brute force in the service of a narrow nationalism. Peace does not inspire them, for them compromise is a dirty word. It is quite clear that they will feel much more comfortable if the Palestinian people is led by fanatical religious fighters than by a man prepared to compromise like Yasser Arafat.