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Molten Lead

JUST AFTER MIDNIGHT, Aljazeera's Arabic channel was reporting on events in Gaza. Suddenly the camera was pointing upwards towards the dark sky. The screen was pitch black. Nothing could be seen, but there was a sound to be heard: the noise of airplanes, a frightening, a terrifying droning.

It was impossible not to think about the tens of thousands of Gazan children who were hearing that sound at that moment, cringing with fright, paralyzed by fear, waiting for the bombs to fall.

"ISRAEL MUST defend itself against the rockets that are terrorizing our Southern towns," the Israeli spokesmen explained. "Palestinians must respond to the killing of their fighters inside the Gaza Strip," the Hamas spokesmen declared.

As a matter of fact, the cease-fire did not collapse, because there was no real cease-fire to start with. The main requirement for any cease-fire in the Gaza Strip must be the opening of the border crossings. There can be no life in Gaza without a steady flow of supplies. But the crossings were not opened, except for a few hours now and again. The blockade on land, on sea and in the air against a million and a half human beings is an act of war, as much as any dropping of bombs or launching of rockets. It paralyzes life in the Gaza Strip: eliminating most sources of employment, pushing hundreds of thousands to the brink of starvation, stopping most hospitals from functioning, disrupting the supply of electricity and water.

Those who decided to close the crossings – under whatever pretext – knew that there is no real cease-fire under these conditions.

That is the main thing. Then there came the small provocations which were designed to get Hamas to react. After several months, in which hardly any Qassam rockets were launched, an army unit was sent into the Strip "in order to destroy a tunnel that came close to the border fence". From a purely military point of view, it would have made more sense to lay an ambush on our side of the fence. But the aim was to find a pretext for the termination of the cease-fire, in a way that made it plausible to put the blame on the Palestinians. And indeed, after several such small actions, in which Hamas fighters were killed, Hamas retaliated with a massive launch of rockets, and – lo and behold – the cease-fire was at an end. Everybody blamed Hamas.

WHAT WAS THE AIM? Tzipi Livni announced it openly: to liquidate Hamas rule in Gaza. The Qassams served only as a pretext.

Liquidate Hamas rule? That sounds like a chapter out of “The March of Folly”. After all, it is no secret that it was the Israeli government which set up Hamas to start with. When I once asked a former Shin-Bet chief, Yaakov Peri, about it, he answered enigmatically: “We did not create it, but we did not hinder its creation.”

For years, the occupation authorities favored the Islamic movement in the occupied territories. All other political activities were rigorously suppressed, but their activities in the mosques were permitted. The calculation was simple and naive: at the time, the PLO was considered the main enemy, Yasser Arafat was the current Satan. The Islamic movement was preaching against the PLO and Arafat, and was therefore viewed as an ally.

With the outbreak of the first intifada in 1987, the Islamic movement officially renamed itself Hamas (Arabic initials of “Islamic Resistance Movement”) and joined the fight. Even then, the Shin-Bet took no action against them for almost a year, while Fatah members were executed or imprisoned in large numbers. Only after a year, were Sheikh Ahmed Yassin and his colleagues also arrested.

Since then the wheel has turned. Hamas has now become the current Satan, and the PLO is considered by many in Israel almost as a branch of the Zionist organization. The logical conclusion for an Israeli government seeking peace would have been to make wide-ranging concessions to the Fatah leadership: ending of the occupation, signing of a peace treaty, foundation of the State of Palestine, withdrawal to the 1967 borders, a reasonable solution of the refugee problem, release of all Palestinian prisoners. That would have arrested the rise of Hamas for sure.

But logic has little influence on politics. Nothing of this sort happened. On the contrary, after the murder of Arafat, Ariel Sharon declared that Mahmoud Abbas, who took his place, was a “plucked chicken”. Abbas was not allowed the slightest political achievement. The negotiations, under American auspices, became a joke. The most authentic Fatah leader, Marwan Barghouti, was sent to prison for life. Instead of a massive prisoner release, there were petty and insulting “gestures”.

Abbas was systematically humiliated, Fatah looked like an empty shell and Hamas won a resounding victory in the Palestinian election – the most democratic election ever held in the Arab world. Israel boycotted the

elected government. In the ensuing internal struggle, Hamas assumed direct control over the Gaza Strip.

And now, after all this, the government of Israel decided to “liquidate Hamas rule in Gaza” – with blood, fire and columns of smoke.

THE OFFICIAL NAME of the war is “Cast Lead”, two words from a children’s song about a Hanukkah toy.

It would be more accurate to call it “the the Election War”.

In the past, too, military action has been taken during election campaigns. Menachem Begin bombed the Iraqi nuclear reactor during the 1981 campaign. When Shimon Peres claimed that this was an election gimmick, Begin cried out at his next rally: “Jews, do you believe that I would send our brave boys to their death or, worse, to be taken prisoner by human animals, in order to win an election?” Begin won.

Peres is no Begin. When, during the 1996 election campaign, he ordered the invasion of Lebanon (operation “Grapes of Wrath”), everybody was convinced that he had done it for electoral gain. The war was a failure and Peres lost the elections and Binyamin Netanyahu came to power.

Barak and Tzipi Livni are now resorting to the same old trick. According to the polls, Barak’s predicted election result rose within 48 hours by five Knesset seats. About 80 dead Palestinians for each seat. But it is difficult to walk on a pile of dead bodies. The success may evaporate in a minute if the war comes to be considered by the Israeli public as a failure. For example, if the rockets continue to hit Beersheba, or if the ground attack leads to heavy Israeli casualties.

The timing was chosen meticulously from another angle too. The attack started two days after Christmas, when American and European leaders are on holiday until after New Year. The calculation: even if somebody wanted to try and stop the war, no one would give up his holiday. That ensured several days free from outside pressures.

Another reason for the timing: these are George Bush’s last days in the White House. This blood-soaked moron could be expected to support the war enthusiastically, as indeed he did. Barack Obama has not yet entered office and had a ready made pretext for keeping silent: “there is only one President”. The silence does not bode well for the term of president Obama.

THE MAIN LINE was: not to repeat the mistakes of Lebanon War II. This was endlessly repeated on all the news programs and talk shows.

This does not change the fact: the Gaza War is an almost exact replica of the second Lebanon war.

The strategic concept is the same: to terrorize the civilian population by unremitting attacks from the air, sowing death and destruction. This poses no danger to the pilots, since the Palestinians have no anti-aircraft weapons at all. The calculation: if the entire life-supporting infrastructure in the Strip is utterly destroyed and total anarchy ensues, the population will rise up and overthrow the Hamas regime. Mahmoud Abbas will then ride back into Gaza on the back of Israeli tanks.

In Lebanon, this calculation did not work out. The bombed population, including the Christians, rallied behind Hizbullah, and Hassan Nasrallah became the hero of the Arab world. Something similar will probably happen this time, too. Generals are experts on using weapons and moving troops, not on mass psychology.

Some time ago I wrote that the Gaza blockade was a scientific experiment designed to find out how much one can starve a population and turn its life into hell before they break. This experiment was conducted with the generous help of Europe and the US. Up to now, it did not succeed. Hamas became stronger and the range of the Qassams became longer. The present war is a continuation of the experiment by other means.

It may be that the army will “have no alternative” but to re-conquer the Gaza Strip because there is no other way to stop the Qassams – except coming to an agreement with Hamas, which is contrary to government policy. When the ground invasion starts, everything will depend on the motivation and capabilities of the Hamas fighters vis-à-vis the Israeli soldiers. Nobody can know what will happen.

DAY AFTER DAY, night after night, Aljazeera’s Arabic channel broadcasts the atrocious pictures: heaps of mutilated bodies, tearful relatives looking for their dear ones among the dozens of corpses spread out on the ground, a woman pulling her young daughter from under the rubble, doctors without medicines trying to save the lives of the wounded. (The English-language Aljazeera, unlike its Arab-language sister-station, has undergone an amazing about face, broadcasting only a sanitized picture and freely distributing Israeli government propaganda. It would be interesting to know what happened there.)

Millions are seeing these terrible images, picture after picture, day after day. These images are imprinted on their minds forever: horrible Israel, abominable Israel, inhuman Israel. A whole generation of haters. That is a terrible price, which we will be compelled to pay long after the other results of the war itself have been forgotten in Israel.

But there is another thing that is being imprinted on the minds of these millions: the picture of the miserable, corrupt, passive Arab regimes.

As seen by Arabs, one fact stands out above all others: the wall of shame.

For the million and a half Arabs in Gaza, who are suffering so terribly, the only opening to the world that is not dominated by Israel is the border with Egypt. Only from there can food arrive to sustain life and medicaments to save the injured. This border remains closed at the height of the horror. The Egyptian army has blocked the only way for food and medicines to enter, while surgeons operate on the wounded without anesthetics.

Throughout the Arab world, from end to end, there echoed the words of Hassan Nasrallah: The leaders of Egypt are accomplices to the crime, they are collaborating with the “Zionist enemy” in trying to break the Palestinian people. It can be assumed that he did not mean only Mubarak, but also all the other leaders, from the king of Saudi Arabia to the Palestinian President. Seeing the demonstrations throughout the Arab world and listening to the slogans, one gets the impression that their leaders seem to many Arabs pathetic at best, and miserable collaborators at worst.

This will have historic consequences. A whole generation of Arab leaders, a generation imbued with the ideology of secular Arab nationalism, the successors of Gamal Abd-al-Nasser, Hafez al-Assad and Yasser Arafat, may be swept from the stage. In the Arab space, the only viable alternative is the ideology of Islamic fundamentalism.

This war is a writing on the wall: Israel is missing the historic chance of making peace with secular Arab nationalism. Tomorrow, It may be faced with a uniformly fundamentalist Arab world, Hamas multiplied by a thousand.

MY TAXI DRIVER in Tel-Aviv the other day was thinking aloud: Why not call up the sons of the ministers and members of the Knesset, form them into a combat unit and send them off to head the coming ground attack on Gaza?