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Uri Avnery

Help! A Cease Fire!

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FORGET THE Qassams. Forget the mortar shells. They are nothing compared with what Hamas launched at us this week:

The chief of the Hamas government in the Gaza Strip, Ismail Haniyeh, has approached an Israeli newspaper and proposed a cease-fire. No more Qassams, no more mortars, no suicide bombings, no Israeli military incursions into the Strip, no "targeted liquidations" of leaders. A total cease-fire. And not only in the Gaza Strip, but in the West Bank, too.

The military leadership exploded in anger. Who does he think he is, that bastard? That he can stop us with such dirty tricks?

THIS IS the second time within a few days that an attempt has been made to thwart our war plans.

Two weeks ago, the American intelligence community declared, in an authoritative report, that Iran had stopped its attempt to produce a nuclear bomb as early as four years ago.

Instead of heaving a sigh of relief, Israeli officials reacted with undisguised anger. Since then, all the commentators in Israel, as well as our huge network of hired pens around the world, have tried to undermine this document. It is mendacious, without foundation, motivated by a hidden, sinister agenda.

But miraculously, the report survived unscathed. It has not even been scratched.

The report, so it seems, has swept from the table any possibility of an American and/or Israeli military attack on Iran. Now comes the peace initiative of Haniyeh and endangers the strategy of our military establishment towards the Gaza Strip.

Again, the army choir gets going. Generals in uniform and out of uniform, military correspondents, political correspondents, commentators of all stripes and genders, politicians from left and right - all are attacking the Haniyeh offer.

The message is: it must not be accepted under any circumstances! It should not even be considered! On the contrary: the offer shows that Hamas is about to break, and therefore the war against it must be intensified, the blockade on Gaza must be tightened, more leaders must be killed - indeed, why not kill Haniyeh himself? What are we waiting for?

A paradox inherent in the conflict since its beginning is at work here: if the Palestinians are strong, it is dangerous to make peace with them. If they are weak, there is no need to make peace with them. Either way, they must be broken.

"There is nothing to talk about!" Ehud Olmert declared at once. So everything is alright, the bloodletting can go on.

AND IT IS indeed going on. In the Gaza Strip and around it, a cruel little war is being waged. As usual, each side claims that it is only reacting to the atrocities of the other side.

The Israeli side claims that it is responding to the Qassams and mortars. What sovereign state could tolerate being

bombarded by deadly missiles from the other side of the border?

True, thousands of missiles have killed only a tiny number of people. More than 100 times as many are killed and injured on the roads. But the Qassams are sowing terror, the inhabitants of Sderot and the surrounding area demand revenge and reinforcement for their houses, which would cost a fortune.

If the Qassams were really bothering our political and military leaders, they would have jumped at the cease-fire offer. But the leaders don't really care about what's happening to the Sderot population, out on the geographical and political "periphery", far from the center of the country. It carries no political or economic weight. In the eyes of the leadership, its suffering is, all in all, tolerable. It also has an important positive side: it provides an ideal pretext for the actions of the army.

THE ISRAELI strategic aim in Gaza is not to put an end to the Qassams. It would still be the same if not a single Qassam fell on Israel.

The real aim is to break the Palestinians, which means breaking Hamas.

The method is simple, even primitive: to tighten the blockade on land, on sea and in the air, until the situation in the Strip becomes absolutely intolerable.

The total stoppage of supplies, except the very minimum necessary to prevent starvation, has reduced life to an inhuman level. There are effectively no imports or exports, economic life has ground to a standstill, the cost of living has risen sky-high. The supply of fuel has already been reduced by half, and is planned to sink even lower. The water supply can be cut at will.

Military activity is gradually increasing. The Israeli army conducts daily incursions, employing tanks and armored bulldozers, in order to nibble at the margins of the inhabited areas and draw the Palestinian fighters into a face to face confrontation. Every day, from five to ten Palestinian fighters are being killed, together with some civilians. Every day, inhabitants are being abducted in order to extract information from them. The declared purpose is attrition, to harry and wear down, and perhaps also to prepare for the re-conquest of the Strip - even if the army chiefs want to avoid this at almost any price.

One after another, the Palestinian leaders and commanders are being killed from the air. Every point in the Strip is exposed to Israeli airplanes, helicopter gunships and drones. Up-to-date technology makes it possible to track the "children of death", those marked for killing, and a wide net of informers and agents, some of them under duress, which has been built up well in advance, completes the picture.

The army chiefs hope that by tightening all these screws they can push the local population to rise up against Hamas and the other fighting organizations. All Palestinian opposition to the occupation will collapse. The entire Palestinian people will raise their hands in surrender and submit to the mercies of the occupation, which will be able to do as it pleases - expropriate lands, enlarge settlements, set up walls and roadblocks, slice up the West Bank into a series of semi-autonomous enclaves.

In this Israeli plan, the job reserved for the Palestinian Authority is to act as subcontractors for Israeli security, in return for a stream of money that will safeguard its control of the enclaves.

At the end of this phase of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Palestinian people are supposed to be cut to pieces

and helpless in face of the Israeli expansion. The historic clash between the unstoppable force (the Zionist enterprise) and the immovable object (the Palestinian population) will end with the crushing of Palestinian opposition.

IN ORDER to succeed in this, a sophisticated diplomatic game must be played. Under no circumstances may the support of the international community be lost. On the contrary, the entire world, led by the US and EU, must support Israel and look upon its actions as a just struggle against Palestinian terrorism, itself an integral part of "international terrorism".

The Annapolis conference, and afterwards the Paris meeting, were important steps in this direction. Almost the whole world, including most of the Arab world, has fallen into step with the Israeli plan - perhaps innocently, perhaps cynically.

Events after Annapolis developed as expected: no negotiations have started, both side are just playing with images. The very first day after Annapolis, the Israeli government announced huge building projects beyond the Green Line. When Condoleezza Rice mumbled some words of opposition, it was announced that the plans had been shelved. In fact they continue at full speed.

How do Olmert and his colleagues fool the whole world? Benjamin Disraeli once said about a certain British politician: "The Right Honourable Gentleman surprised his opponents bathing in the sea and took away their clothes." We, the pioneers of the Two-State Solution, can say this about our government. It has stolen our flag and wrapped it around itself in order to hide its intentions.

At long last, there now exists a world-wide consensus that peace in our region must be based on the co-existence of the State of Israel and the State of Palestine. Our government has slipped into it and is exploiting this agreement with another aim altogether: the rule of Israel in the whole country and the turning of the Palestinian population centers into a series of Bantustans. This is, in fact, a One-State-Solution (Greater Israel) in the guise of the Two-State Solution.

CAN THIS plan succeed?

The battle of Gaza is in full swing. In spite of the huge military superiority of the Israeli army, it is not one-sided. Even the Israeli commanders point out that the Hamas forces are getting stronger. They train hard, their weapons are getting more effective and they show a lot of courage and determination. It seems that the falling of their commanders and fighters in a steady bloodletting is not affecting their morale. That is one of the reasons why the Israeli army is shrinking back from re-conquering the Gaza Strip.

Inside the Strip, both the main organizations enjoy wide public support - the demonstration to commemorate Yassir Arafat organized by Fatah and the counter-demonstration of Hamas each drew hundreds of thousands of participants. But it seems that the great majority of the Palestinian public wants national unity in order to fight together against the occupation. They do not want religious compulsion, but neither will they tolerate a leadership that cooperates with the occupation.

The government may be very mistaken in counting on the obedience of Fatah. Competing with Hamas, Fatah may surprise us by becoming a fighting organization once again. The stream of money flowing into the Authority may not prevent this. Ze'ev Jabotinsky was wiser than Tony Blair when he said 85 years ago that you cannot buy a whole people.

If the Israeli army invades Gaza in order to re-conquer it, the population will stand behind the fighters. Nobody can know how it will react if the economic misery gets worse. The results may be unexpected. Experience with other liberation movements indicates that misery can break a population, but it can also strengthen it.

This is, simply put, an existential test for the Palestinian people - perhaps the most severe since 1948. It is also a test for the shrewd policy of Ehud Olmert, Ehud Barak, Tzipi Livni and the army chiefs.

So a cease-fire is not likely to come into effect. At first Olmert rejected one out of hand. Then this was denied. Then the denial was denied.

The inhabitants of Sderot would probably have been glad to accept a cease-fire. But then, who bothers to ask them.

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