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# Blood and Champagne

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EVERY PEOPLE elevate the profession in which they excel.

If a person in the street were asked to name the area of enterprise in which we Israelis excel, his answer would probably be: Hi-Tech. And indeed, in this area we have recorded some impressive achievements. It seems as if hardly a day passes without an Israeli start-up company that was born in a garage being sold for hundreds of millions. Little Israel is one of the major hi-tech powers in the world.

But the profession in which Israel is not only one of the biggest, but the unchallenged Numero Uno is: liquidations.

This week this was proven once again. The Hebrew verb "lekhassel" - liquidate - in all its grammatical forms, currently dominates our public discourse. Respected professors debate with academic solemnity when to "liquidate" and whom. Used generals discuss with professional zeal the technicalities of "liquidation", its rules and methods. Shrewd politicians compete with each other about the number and status of the candidates for "liquidation".

INDEED, FOR a long time now there has not been such an orgy of jubilation and self-congratulation in the Israeli media as there was this week. Every reporter, every commentator, every political hack, every transient celeb interviewed on TV, on the radio and in the newspapers, was radiant with pride. We have done it! We have succeeded! We have "liquidated" Imad Mughniyeh!

He was a "terrorist". And not just a terrorist, a master terrorist! An arch-terrorist! The very king of terrorists! From hour to hour his stature grew, reaching gigantic proportions. Compared to him, Osama Bin-Laden is a mere beginner. The list of his exploits grew from news report to news report, from headline to headline.

There is and never has been anyone like him. For years he has kept out of sight. But our good boys - many, many good boys - have not neglected him for a moment. They worked day and night, weeks and months, years and decades, in order to trace him. They "knew him better than his friends, better than he knew himself" (verbatim quote from a respected Haaretz commentator, gloating like all his colleagues).

True, one killjoy Western commentator argued on Aljazeera that Mughniyeh had dropped from sight because he had ceased to be important, that his great days as a terrorist were in the 80s and 90s, when he hijacked a plane and brought down the Marine headquarters in Beirut and Israeli institutions abroad. Since Hizbullah has turned into a state-within-the-state, with a kind of regular army, he had - according to this version - outlived his usefulness.

But what the hell. Mughniyeh-the-person has disappeared, and Mughniyeh-the-legend has taken his place, a world-embracing mythological terrorist, who has long been marked as "a Son of Death" (i.e. a person to be killed) as declared on TV by another out-of-use general. His "liquidation" was a huge, almost supra-natural, achievement, much more important than Lebanon War II, in which we were not so very successful. The "liquidation" equals at least the glorious Entebbe exploit, if not more.

True, the Holy Book enjoins us: "Rejoice not when thine enemy falleth, and let not thine heart be glad when he stumbleth / Lest the Lord see it and it displeases him." (Proverbs 24:17) But this was not just any enemy, it was a super-super-enemy, and therefore the Lord will certainly excuse us for dancing with joy from talk-show to talk-show, from issue to issue, from speech to speech, as long as we do not distribute candies in the street - even if the Israeli government denies feebly that we were the ones who "liquidated" the man.

AS CHANCE would have it, the "liquidation" was carried out only a few days after I wrote an article about the inability of occupying powers to understand the inner logic of resistance organizations. Mughniyeh's "liquidation" is an outstanding example of this. (Of course, Israel gave up its occupation of South Lebanon some years ago, but the relationship between the parties has remained as it was.)

In the eyes of the Israeli leadership, the "liquidation" was a huge success. We have "cut off the head of the serpent" (another headline from Haaretz). We have inflicted on Hizbullah immense damage, so much that it cannot be repaired. "This is not revenge but prevention", as another of the guided reporters (Haaretz again) declared. This is such an important achievement, that it outweighs the inevitable revenge, whatever the number of victims-to-be.

In the eyes of Hizbullah, things look quite different. The organization has acquired another precious asset: a national hero, whose name fills the air from Iran to Morocco. The "liquidated" Mughniyeh is worth more than the live Mughniyeh, irrespective of what his real status may have been at the end of his life.

Enough to remember what happened here in 1942, when the British "liquidated" Abraham Stern (a.k.a. Ya'ir): from his blood the Lehi organization (a.k.a. Stern Gang) was born and became perhaps the most efficient terrorist organization of the 20th century.

Therefore, Hizbullah has no interest at all in belittling the status of the liquidatee. On the contrary, Hassan Nasrallah, exactly like Ehud Olmert, has every interest in blowing up his stature to huge proportions.

If Hizbullah has lately been far from the all-Arab spotlight, it is now back with a bang. Almost every Arab station devoted hours to "the brother the martyr the commander Imad Mughniyeh al-Hajj Raduan".

In the struggle for Lebanon - the main battle that occupies Nasrallah - the organization has scored a great advantage. Multitudes joined the funeral, overshadowing the almost simultaneous memorial parade for his adversary, Rafiq al-Hariri. In his speech, Nasrallah described his opponents contemptuously as accomplices to the murder of the hero, despicable collaborators of Israel and the United States, and called upon them to leave the house and move to Tel Aviv or New York. He has gone up another notch in his struggle for domination of the Land of the Cedars.

And the main thing: the anger about the murder and the pride in the martyr will inspire another generation of youngsters, who will be ready to die for Allah and Nasrallah. The more Israeli propaganda enlarges the proportions of Mughniyeh, the more young Shiites will be inspired to follow his example.

The career of the man himself is interesting in this respect. When he was born in a Shiite village in South Lebanon, the Shiites there were a despised, downtrodden and impotent community. He joined the Palestinian Fatah organization, which dominated South Lebanon at the time, eventually becoming one of Yasser Arafat's bodyguards (I may even have seen him when I met Arafat in Beirut). But when Israel succeeded in driving the Fatah forces out of South Lebanon, Mughniyeh stayed behind and joined Hizbullah, the new fighting force that had sprung up as a direct result of the Israeli occupation.

ISRAEL NOW RESEMBLES the person whose neighbor overhead has dropped one boot on the floor, and who is waiting for the second boot to fall.

Everybody knows that there will be revenge. Nasrallah has promised this, adding that it could take place anywhere in the world. For a long time already, people in Israel believe Nasrallah much more than Olmert.

Israeli security organs are issuing dire warnings for people going abroad - to be on guard at every moment, not to be conspicuous, not to congregate with other Israelis, not to accept unusual invitations, etc. The media have magnified these warnings to the point of hysteria. In the Israeli embassies, security has been tightened. On the Northern border, too, an alert has been sounded - just a few days after Olmert boasted in the Knesset that, as a result of the war, the Northern border is now quieter than ever before.

Such worries are far from baseless. All the past "liquidations" of this kind have brought with them dire consequences:

– The classic example is, of course, the "liquidation" of Nasrallah's predecessor, Abbas Mussawi. He was killed in South Lebanon in 1992 by Apache gunships. All of Israel rejoiced. Then, too, the Champagne was flowing. In revenge, Hizbullah blew up the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires, as well as the Jewish community center there. The planner was, it is now alleged, Imad Mughniyeh. More than a hundred people perished. The main result: instead of the rather grey Mussawi, the sophisticated, masterly Nasrallah took over.

– Before that, Golda Meir ordered a series of "liquidations" to revenge the tragedy of the Israeli athletes in Munich (most of whom were actually killed by the inept German police trying to prevent their being flown to Algeria as hostages). Not one of the "liquidated" had anything to do with the outrage itself. They were PLO diplomatic representatives, sitting ducks in their offices. The matter is described at length in Stephen Spielberg's kitschy film "Munich". The result: the PLO became stronger and turned into a state-in-the-making, Yasser Arafat eventually returned to Palestine.

– The "liquidation" of Yahyah Ayyash in Gaza in 1996 resembles the Mughniyeh affair. It was carried out by means of a booby-trapped cellular telephone. Ayyash's dimensions, too, were blown up to giant proportions, so that he had become a legend already in his own lifetime. The nickname "the engineer" was attached to him because he prepared the explosive devices used by Hamas. Shimon Peres, who had succeeded to the Prime Ministership after the murder of Yitzhak Rabin, believed that the "liquidation" would lend him huge popularity and get him re-elected. The opposite happened: Hamas reacted with a series of sensational suicide-bombings and brought Binyamin Netanyahu to power.

– Fathi Shikaki, head of Islamic Jihad, was "liquidated" in 1995 by a bicyclist who shot him down in a Malta street. The small organization was not eradicated, but on the contrary grew through its revenge actions. Today it is the group which is launching the Qassams at Sderot.

– Hamas leader Khaled Mash'al was actually being "liquidated" in a street in Amman by the injection of poison. The act was exposed and its perpetrators identified and a furious King Hussein compelled Israel to provide the antidote that saved his life. The "liquidators" were allowed to go home in return for the release of Hamas founder Sheik Ahmad Yassin from Israeli prison. As a result, Mash'al was promoted and is now the senior political leader of Hamas.

– Sheik Yassin himself, a paraplegic, was "liquidated" by attack helicopters while leaving a mosque after prayer. A previous attempt by bombing his home had failed. The sheik became a martyr in the eyes of the entire Arab world, and has served since as an inspiration for hundreds of Hamas attacks.

THE COMMON denominator of all these and many other actions is that they did not harm the organizations of the "liquidatees", but boomeranged. And all of them brought in their wake grievous revenge attacks.

The decision to carry out a "liquidation" resembles the decision that was taken to start the Second Lebanon War: not one of the deciders gives a damn for the suffering of the civilian population that inevitably falls victim to the revenge.

Why, then, are the "liquidations" carried out?

The response of one of the generals who was asked this question: "There is no unequivocal answer to this."

These words are dripping with Chutzpa: how can one decide on such an action when there is no unequivocal answer to the question of its being worth the price?

I suspect that the real reason is both political and psychological. Political, because it is always popular. After every "liquidation", there is much jubilation. When the revenge arrives, the public (and the media) do not see the connection between the "liquidation" and the response. Each is seen separately. Few people have the time and the inclination to think about it, when everybody is burning with fury about the latest murderous attack.

In the present situation, there is an additional political motivation: the army has no answer to the Qassams, nor has it any desire to get enmeshed in the re-occupation of the Gaza Strip, with all the expected casualties. A sensational "liquidation" is a simple alternative.

The psychological reason is also clear: it is satisfying. True, the "liquidation" - as the word shows - is more appropriate for the underworld than for the security organs of a state. But it is a challenging and complex task, as in a Mafia film, which gives much satisfaction to the "liquidators". Ehud Barak, for example, was a liquidator from the start of his military career. When the "liquidation" ends in success, the executioners can raise glasses of champagne.

A mixture of blood, champagne and folly is an intoxicating but toxic cocktail.

16.2.08