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Uri Avnery on hudna

Good Morning, Hamas

- Archives - Archives Générales 2006 - 2022 - 2008 - N°12. Mars/march/märz 2008 - International - Israël/Palestine -

Date de mise en ligne : Wednesday 12 March 2008

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WE ISRAELIS live in a world of ghosts and monsters. We do not conduct a war against living persons and real organizations, but against devils and demons which are out to destroy us. It is a war between the Sons of Light and the Sons of Darkness, between absolute good and absolute evil. That's how it looks to us, and that's how it looks to the other side, too.

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Let's try to bring this war down from virtual spheres to the solid ground of reality. There can be no reasonable policy, nor even rational discussion, if we do not escape from the realm of horrors and nightmares.

After the Hamas victory in the Palestinian elections, Gush Shalom said that we must speak with them. Here are some of the questions that were showered on me from all sides:

– Do you like Hamas?

Not at all. I have very strong secular convictions. I oppose any ideology that mixes politics with religion - whether Jewish, Muslim or Christian, in Israel, the Arab world or America.

That does not prevent me from speaking with Hamas people, as I have spoken with other people with whom I don't agree. It has not prevented me from being a guest at their homes, to exchange views with them and to try to understand them. Some of them I liked, some I did not.

– It is said that Hamas was created by Israel. Is that true?

Israel did not "create" Hamas, but it certainly helped it along in its initial stages.

During the first 20 years of the occupation, the Israeli leadership saw the PLO as its chief enemy. That's why it favored Palestinian organizations that, it was thought, could undermine the PLO. One example of this was Ariel Sharon's ludicrous attempt to set up Arab "village leagues" that would act as agents of the occupation.

The Israeli intelligence community, which in the last 60 years has failed almost every time in forecasting events in the Arab world, also failed this time. They believed that the emergence of an Islamic organization would weaken the secular PLO. While the military administration of the occupied territories was throwing into prison any Palestinian who engaged in political activity - even for peace - it did not touch the religious activists. The mosque was the only place where Palestinians could get together and plan political action.

This policy was, of course, based on a complete misunderstanding of Islam and Palestinian reality.

Hamas was officially founded immediately after the outbreak of the first intifada at the end of 1987. The Israeli Security Service (known as Shabak or Shin Bet) handled it with kid gloves. Only a year later did it arrest the founder, Sheik Ahmad Yassin.

It is ironic that the Israeli leadership is now supporting the PLO in the hope of undermining Hamas. There is no better

evidence for the stupidity of our "experts" as far as Arab matters are concerned, stemming from both arrogance and contempt. Hamas is far more dangerous to Israel than the PLO ever was.

– Did the Hamas election victory show that Islam was on the rise among the Palestinian people?

Not necessarily. The Palestinian people did not become more religious overnight.

True, there is a slow process of Islamization throughout the region, from Turkey to Yemen and from Morocco to Iraq. It is the reaction of the young Arab generation to the failure of secular nationalism to solve their national and social problems. But this did not cause the earthquake in Palestinian society.

– If so, why did Hamas win?

There were several reasons. The main one was the growing conviction of the Palestinians that they would never get anything from the Israelis by non-violent means. After the murder of Yassir Arafat, many Palestinians believed that if they elected Mahmoud Abbas as the new president, he would get from Israel and the US the things they would not give Arafat. They found out that the opposite was happening: No real negotiations, while the settlements were getting larger every day.

They told themselves: if peaceful means don't work, there is no alternative to violent means. And if there be war, there are no braver warriors than Hamas.

Also: the corruption in the higher Fatah echelons had reached such dimensions, that the majority of Palestinians were disgusted. As long as Arafat was alive, the corruption was somehow tolerated, because everybody knew that Arafat himself was honest, and his towering importance for the national struggle overrode the shortcomings of his administration. After Arafat, tolerating the corruption became impossible. Hamas, on the other hand, was considered clean, and its leaders incorrupt. The social and educational Hamas institutions, mainly financed by Saudi Arabia, were widely respected.

The splits within Fatah also helped the Hamas candidates.

Hamas, of course, had not taken part in previous elections, but it was generally assumed - even by Hamas people themselves - that they represented only about 15-25 percent of the electorate.

– Can one reasonably expect the Palestinians to overthrow Hamas themselves?

As long as the occupation goes on, there is no chance of that. An Israeli general said this week that if the Israeli army stopped operating in the West Bank, Hamas would replace Abbas there too.

The administration of Mahmoud Abbas stands on feet of clay - American and Israeli feet. If the Palestinians finally lose what confidence they still have in Abbas, his power would crumble.

– But how can one reach a settlement with an organization that declares that it will never recognize Israel and whose charter calls for the destruction of the Jewish state?

All this matter of "recognition" is nonsense, a pretext for avoiding a dialogue. We do not need "recognition" from anybody. When the United States started a dialogue with Vietnam, it did not demand to be recognized as an Anglo-Saxon, Christian and capitalist state.

If A signs an agreement with B, it means that A recognizes B. All the rest is hogwash.

And in the same matter: The fuss over the Hamas charter is reminiscent of the ruckus about the PLO charter, in its time. That was a quite unimportant document, which was used by our representatives for years as an excuse to refuse to talk with the PLO. Heaven and earth were moved to compel the PLO to annul it. Who remembers that today? The acts of today and tomorrow are important, the papers of yesterday are not.

– What should we speak with Hamas about?

First of all, about a cease-fire. When a wound is bleeding, the blood loss must be stemmed before the wound itself can be treated.

Hamas has many times proposed a cease-fire, Tahidiyeh ("Quiet") in Arabic. This would mean a stop to all hostilities: Qassams and Grad rockets and mortar shells from Hamas and the other organizations, "targeted liquidations", military incursions and starvation from Israel.

The negotiations should be conducted by the Egyptians, particularly since they would have to open the border between the Gaza Strip and Sinai. Gaza must get back its freedom of communication with the world by land, sea and air,

If Hamas demands the extension of the cease-fire to the West Bank, too, this should also be discussed. That would necessitate a Hamas-Fatah-Israel dialogue.

– Won't Hamas exploit the cease-fire to arm itself?

Certainly. And so will Israel. Perhaps we shall succeed, at long last, in finding a defense against short-range rockets.

– If the cease-fire holds, what will be the next step?

An armistice, or Hudnah in Arabic.

Hamas would have a problem in signing a formal agreement with Israel, because Palestine is a Waqf - a religious endowment. (That arose, at the time, for political reasons. When Caliph Omar conquered Palestine, he was afraid that his generals would divide the country among themselves, as they had already done in Syria. So he declared it to be the property of Allah. This resembles the attitude of our own religious people, who maintain that it is a sin to give away any part of the country, because God has expressly promised it to us.)

Hudnah is an alternative to peace. It is a concept deeply embedded in the Islamic tradition. The prophet Muhammad himself agreed a Hudnah with the rulers of Mecca, with whom he was at war after his flight from Mecca to Medina. (By the way, before the Hudnah expired, the inhabitants of Mecca adopted Islam and the prophet entered the town peacefully.) Since it has a religious sanction, its violation by Muslim believers is impossible.

A Hudnah can last for dozens of years and be extended without limit. A long Hudnah is in practice peace, if the

relations between the two parties create a reality of peace.

– So a formal peace is impossible?

There is a solution for this, too. Hamas has declared in the past that it does not object to Abbas conducting peace negotiations, on condition that the agreement reached is put to a plebiscite. If the Palestinian people confirm it, Hamas declared that it will accept the people's decision.

– Why would Hamas accept it?

Like every Palestinian political force, Hamas aspires to power in the Palestinian state that will be set up along the 1967 borders. For that it needs to enjoy the confidence of the majority. There is no doubt whatsoever that the vast majority of the Palestinian people want a state of their own and peace. Hamas knows this well. It will do nothing that would push the majority of the people away.

– And what is the place of Abbas in all this?

He should be pressured to come to an agreement with Hamas, along the lines of the earlier agreement concluded in Mecca. We believe that Israel has a clear interest in negotiating with a Palestinian government that includes the two big movements, so that the agreement reached would be accepted by almost all sections of the Palestinian people.

– Is time working for us?

For many years, Gush Shalom was telling the Israeli public: let's make peace with the secular leadership of Yasser Arafat, because otherwise the national conflict will turn into a religious conflict. Unfortunately, this prophecy, too, has come true.

Those who did not want the PLO, got Hamas. If we don't come to terms with Hamas, we shall be faced with more extreme Islamic organizations, like the Taliban in Afghanistan.

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