

# A Brown-haired Young Man

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June 11, 2011

MY HERO of the year (for now) is a young brown-haired Palestinian refugee living in Syria called Hassan Hijazi.

He was one of hundreds of refugees who held the demonstration on the Syrian side of the Golan border fence, to commemorate the Naqba – “Disaster” – the exodus of more than half the Palestinian people from the territory conquered by Israel in the war of 1948. Some of the protesters ran down to the fence, crossing a minefield. Luckily, none of the mines exploded – perhaps they were just too old.

They entered the Druze village of Majdal Shams, occupied by Israel since 1967, where they spread out. Israeli soldiers shot, killed and wounded several of them. The rest were caught and immediately deported back to Syria.

Except Hassan. He found a bus carrying Israeli and international peace activists who took him with them – perhaps they guessed where he came from, perhaps not. He does not look obviously Arab.

They dropped him near Tel Aviv. He continued his journey by hitchhiking and eventually reached Jaffa, the town where his grandparents had lived .

There, without money and without knowing anyone, he tried to locate the house of his family. He did not succeed – the place has changed much too much.

Eventually, he succeeded in contacting an Israeli TV correspondent, who helped him give himself up to the police. He was arrested and deported back to Syria.

Quite a remarkable exploit.

THE BORDER crossing of the refugees near Majdal Shams caused near panic in Israel.

First there were the usual recriminations. Why was the army not prepared for this event? Who was to blame – Northern Command or Army Intelligence?

Behind all the excitement was the nightmare that has haunted Israel since 1948: that the 750,000 refugees and their descendants, some five million by now, will one day get up and march to the borders of Israel from North, East and South, breach the fences and flood the country. This nightmare is the mirror-image of the refugees’ dream.

During the first years of Israel, this was a waking nightmare. On the day Israel was founded, it had some 650,000 Jewish inhabitants. The return of the refugees would indeed have swamped the young Israeli state. Lately, with more than 6 million Jewish citizens, this fear has receded into the background – but it is always there. Psychologists might say that it represents repressed feelings of guilt in the national psyche.

THIS WEEK, there was a repeat performance. The Palestinians all around Israel have declared June 5 “Naksa” Day, to commemorate the “Setback” of 1967, when Israel spectacularly defeated the armies of Egypt, Syria and Jordan, reinforced by elements from the Iraqi and Saudi armies.

This time the Israeli army was prepared. The fence was reinforced and an anti-tank ditch dug in front of it. When the demonstrators tried to reach the fence – again near Majdal Shams – they were shot by sharpshooters. Some 22 were killed, many dozens were wounded. The Palestinians report that people trying to rescue the wounded and retrieve the dead were also shot and killed.

No doubt, this was a deliberate tactic decided upon in advance by the army command after the Naqba day fiasco, and approved by Binyamin Netanyahu and Ehud Barak. As was said quite openly, the Palestinians had to be taught a lesson they would not forget, so as to drive any idea of an unarmed mass action out of their mind.

It is frighteningly reminiscent of events 10 years ago. After the first intifada, in which stone-throwing youngsters and children won a moral victory that led to the Oslo agreement, our army conducted exercises in anticipation of a second intifada. This broke out after the political disaster of Camp David, and the army was ready.

The new intifada started with mass demonstrations of unarmed Palestinians. They were met by specially trained sharpshooters. Next to each sharpshooter stood an officer who pointed out the individuals who were to be shot because they looked like ringleaders: “The guy in the red shirt. . . Now the boy with the blue trousers. . .”

The unarmed uprising broke down and was replaced by suicide bombers, roadside bombs and other “terrorist” acts. With those our army was on familiar ground.

I suspect very much that we are witnessing much the same thing once more. Again specially trained sharpshooters are at work, directed by officers.

There is a difference, though. In 2001 we were told that our soldiers were shooting into the air. Now we are told that they aim at the Arabs’ legs. Then the Palestinians had to jump high into the air to get killed, now, it seems, they have to bend down .

THE WHOLE thing is not only murderous, but also incredibly dumb.

For decades now, practically all talk about peace has centered on the territories occupied in the 1967 war. President Mahmoud Abbas, President Barack Obama and the Israeli peace movement all talk about the “1967 borders”. When my friends and I started (in 1949) to talk about the two-state solution, we, too, meant these borders. (The “1967 borders” are, in fact, simply the armistice lines agreed upon after the 1948 war.)

Most people, even in the Israeli peace movement, ignored the refugee problem altogether. They were laboring under the illusion that it had gone away, or would do so after peace had been achieved between Israel and the Palestinian Authority. I always warned my friends that this would not happen – five million human beings cannot be simply shut out. It is no use to

make peace with half the Palestinian people, and just ignore the other half. It will not mean “the end of the conflict”, whatever might be stated in a peace agreement.

But through years of discussions, mostly behind closed doors, a consensus has been reached. Almost all Palestinian leaders have agreed, either explicitly or implicitly, to the formula of “a just and agreed upon solution of the refugee problem” – so that any solution is subject to Israeli approval. I have spoken about this many times with Yasser Arafat, Faisal al-Husseini and others.

In practice, this means that a symbolic number of refugees will be allowed back into Israel (the exact number to be fixed in negotiations), with the others to be resettled in the State of Palestine (which must be big and viable enough to make this possible) or receive generous compensation that will allow them to start a new life where they are or elsewhere.

TO MAKE this complicated and painful solution easier, ev-

eryone agreed that it would be best to deal with this matter near the end of the peace negotiations, after mutual trust and a more relaxed atmosphere had been established.

And here comes our government and tries to solve the problem with sharpshooters – not as the last resort, but as the first. Instead of countering the protesters with effective non-lethal means, they kill people. This will, of course, intensify the protests, mobilize masses of refugees and put the “refugee problem” squarely on the table, in the center of the table, before negotiations have even started.

In other words: the conflict moves back from 1967 to 1948. For Hassan Hijazi, the grandson of a refugee from Jaffa, this is huge achievement.

Nothing could be more stupid than this course of action by Netanyahu and Company.

Unless, of course, they are doing this consciously, in order to make any peace negotiations impossible.