

A Stink Bomb

THIS WEEK the Netanyahu government let off a stink bomb under the chair of Mahmoud Abbas.

For months now, Abbas has angered the Prime Minister. He has refused to start "peace negotiations" while the settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem are continually expanding.

Everyone knows that the proposed negotiations are meaningless and will lead nowhere. Binyamin Netanyahu needs them to deflect American pressure. Barack Obama needs them to show some achievement, tiny as it may be. But Abbas knows that his acquiescence would help Hamas to present him as a collaborator.

Now Netanyahu has decided to teach Abbas a lesson. For three days, day after day and program after program, Channel 10 (Israel's second biggest TV station) has broadcast shocking "disclosures" about financial and sexual scandals at the top of the Palestinian Authority.

A person who was presented as a "senior commander" of the Palestinian Security Service, with the rank of general, appeared on Israeli television and accused the leaders of the Palestinian Authority and the Fatah movement of stealing hundreds of millions of dollars and committing disgusting sexual offences.

The "disclosures" may endanger the very existence of the Authority and Fatah.

Such material would not have been broadcast if the Israel Security Agency (known as Shin Bet or Shabak) had objected to it. It is reasonable to assume that it is deeply involved.

THE HAPPY father of the scoop was Tzvi Yehezkeili, the "correspondent for Arab affairs" of Channel 10.

I have been following Yehezkeili's broadcasts for years, and it is hard for me to recall a single word of his that does not show Muslims in general or Arabs in particular in a ridiculous light. His reports, and the material he chooses to show, are generally pitched somewhere between sky-high overbearing and bottomless contempt.

In this he is nothing exceptional in our media. Most "correspondents for Arab affairs" are alumni of Army Intelligence, and consider themselves active members of the great propaganda enterprise against the Arabs.

Many of them enjoy the generous assistance of certain institutions financed by American billionaires, whose sole function is to poison the wells of peace and understanding. Israeli Jews, most of whom do not understand Arabic, are not aware of the fact that under the guise of objective information they are being fed items of well executed anti-Arab psychological warfare. These institutions employ scores of people who monitor

every word and every picture that appear in the media throughout the Arab world. When one sifts the millions of words and thousands of broadcasts emanating from 22 Arab countries (including the Palestinian Authority) and the other parts of the Muslim world, one can easily find one crazy utterance and one ridiculous event every day. That is the picture presented to the Israeli public. (How would we ourselves look if subjected to this kind of scrutiny?)

SO MUCH for the father of the scoop. Who is the whistleblower? Fahmi Shabaneh, a former chief of the Palestinian security service in Hebron, is being pictured by Yehezkeili as a hero ready to die at any moment for the cause of moral purity. He has even prepared a grave for himself on the Mount of Olives.

Frankly, I would not buy a used car from him.

His appearance on Israeli television is by itself, to say the least, odd. Why would this Palestinian patriot appear in the Israeli media, of all places? Why did he not present his merchandise to an Arab station or newspaper, or at least to a neutral one? The argument that nobody would have published it does not make sense. Would Hamas have refused? Is there in Europe and the US a lack of media which would jump at the chance to throw mud at Arabs?

This material serves, of course, the Israeli occupation. It supplies ammunition to all those who want to show that "We Have No Partner For Peace". It helps the settlers and other war-mongers.

For this reason we cannot abstain from dealing with this matter, however repellent. This stink bomb is an explosive device.

HOWEVER, THE quality of the disclosure does not necessarily depend on the character of Tzvi Yehezkeili and Fahmi Shabaneh. Incriminating information often comes from tainted sources. It must be judged on its own merits.

Until now I have seen five broadcasts on this affair. They were full of accusations but empty of proof. Shabaneh spoke about boxes full of evidence. He brandished files and papers. But he did not present any paper in a way that would have allowed its examination.

Proof means, for example, the presentation of a bank document in a way that makes it possible to read it properly, study its details and draw conclusions. The documents that were flashed on screen for a split second did not allow any of this.

Even more suspect is the pornographic video clip that was shot, so it was claimed, in the apartment of a Palestinian woman who served as bait for Rafiq al-Husseini, Abbas' chief of staff. I have met and spoke

with the man only superficially (during demonstrations at Bil'in). He belongs to one of the largest noble families of Jerusalem, which has counted among its members Hajj Amin, the former Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, leader of the 1936 Palestinian revolt, as well as Abd-al-Qader, the legendary commander of the Arab fighters in Jerusalem in 1948, and the adored and beloved Faisal, the late leader of the Arab community in the city.

According to Shabaneh, Husseini and his female secretary (and mistress) came to the home of the woman, who had applied for a job on Abbas' staff. Husseini demanded a sexual bribe, and she helped Shabaneh to set a trap for him. The camera shows him undressing and getting naked into bed, where the virtuous Shabaneh surprises him.

Up to this point, the scenario seems possible, if only tenuously. But in the course of the action something happens that is manifestly unlikely. When the camera shows Husseini in the company of the secretary and the woman job-seeker, he tells her that "Arafat was a thief, Abbas is a thief, they are all thieves".

Is it plausible that the No. 2 man in the office of the Palestinian president would talk in such a way to a stranger, a mere job-seeker? In her home? In the presence of a witness? Why, is he a little child? The hidden camera filmed the scene from a distance, making it impossible to read the lips of the speaker.

All in all: juicy, hair-raising accusations, very little convincing evidence.

After 40 years on the job as "father of Israeli investigative journalism" (as I was described when I received the Sokolov Prize, the highest award of the Israel journalist community), I dare say that I have a nose for such disclosures – both real and phony. At this stage, after viewing the broadcasts, my impression is that the matter is fishy.

WITHOUT DOUBT, there is a lot of corruption at the top of the Palestinian Authority.

It already started during the days of Yasser Arafat. He himself was clean, but he did not hesitate to use corruption as one of the means to manipulate people.

Nobody who knew Arafat personally could suspect him of being corrupt. Nor did I ever hear accusations or gossip of this kind from Palestinians. He was totally devoted to the Palestinian struggle (and his leadership of it). Material possessions and the good life did not interest him. In this respect he was like David Ben-Gurion and Menachem Begin, only in infinitely harder circumstances. While the people around him built mansions for themselves, he had no home of his own. Once, in Tunis, he boasted to me that he lived in airplanes. That helped him in warding off attempts on his life (for decades, his life was in mortal danger at every moment) and also saved time. His "private" bank accounts served to assure his personal control of the money, a large part of which served for clandestine purposes, such as the acquisition of weapons, the

arming of the Palestinians in the Lebanese refugee camps and their defense against the murderous Phalanges that were out to annihilate them, keeping the political missions throughout the world that conducted the fight in the diplomatic arena, etc.

But Arafat did not fight the corruption of his aides. Perhaps he sometimes even encouraged it. I think he considered it one of the instruments of control over people and factions, which helped him to perform the miracle: to keep Palestinian unity intact in impossible circumstances, in the Diaspora and under occupation.

In my opinion, that was a mistake. Arafat thought that the corrupt businesses of his people would help him control them, but as a matter of fact the corruption helped the Shin Bet to bribe Palestinian personalities and blackmail them, corrupt the leadership and blunt their struggle for liberation.

Palestinian corruption is quite shabby: dubious joint transactions with Israeli businessmen, many of them former military governors; pocketing commissions, winning phony tenders. It is negligible compared, for example, to our own all-encompassing legal corruption. Our prime ministers leave politics for a short time and make tens of millions by using the connections and information acquired in office. Retired generals sell arms and pay bribes all over the world. Twenty oligarchs control practically the whole of the Israeli economy, with the help of ministers and senior officials owned by them. Not to mention the US, where lobbies buy senators and congressmen quite openly with campaign contributions.

BACK TO the virtuous Fahmi Shabaneh. Some months ago, the Israeli police arrested him. He is a resident of East Jerusalem and has an Israeli Identity card. He was accused of serving the Palestinian Authority – a manifestly absurd indictment, since hundreds of East Jerusalemites work for the Authority. The Israeli government closes its eyes, because it is trying to turn the Palestinian Authority into its sub-contractor.

So why was Shabaneh arrested? To give him credit in Palestinian circles and divert suspicion from him, on the eve of his becoming the anti-corruption hero? To blackmail him? He was released on bail (quite unusual in such cases) and his trial is pending. Now he is the "Good Arab", the hero of the Israeli media, which are an integral part of the well-oiled propaganda machine.

From the entire sordid affair, there remains one paramount question: What is the purpose? After all, whoever decides to blacken the face of Abbas knows that he is adding to the power of Hamas, a movement considered by the Palestinian public as untainted by corruption.

While dealing a mortal blow to Abbas, with whom he ostensibly wants to conduct negotiations, Netanyahu is delivering a tremendous gift to Hamas, which does not want to negotiate.

Odd? Perhaps not.