

# A View from the Villa

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**T**HE KILLING OF Muammar Gaddafi and his son Muatasim was not a pretty sight. After seeing it once, I looked away when it was shown again and again on TV – literally ad nauseam.

Commercial TV exists, of course, to make money for the tycoons by appealing to the basest instincts and tastes of the masses. There seems to be an insatiable appetite for gruesome sights.

But in Israel there was another motive for showing these lynch scenes repeatedly, as the commentators made abundantly clear. These scenes proved, to their mind, the primitive, barbaric, murderous nature of the Arab peoples, and, indeed, of Islam as such.

Ehud Barak likes to describe Israel as a “villa in the middle of a jungle”. By now this is accepted by the great majority of our media people. They never miss an opportunity to point out that we live in a “dangerous neighborhood” – making it clear that Israel does not really belong to this neighborhood. We are a civilized Western people, sadly surrounded by these primitive savages.<sup>1</sup>

Since this attitude has far-reaching mental and political implications, let’s have a closer look.

I AM against the death penalty, in all its forms. Executions, whether in Texas or in China, disgust me. I would have much preferred Gaddafi to be tried in a proper court.

But my first reaction to the sight was: My God, how much a people must hate its ruler if they treat him like that! Obviously, the decades of abominable terror inflicted on the Libyan people by this half-crazy despot have destroyed any remnants of mercy they may have felt. (His fanatical defenders to the last, members of his tribe, seem to be a tiny minority.)

His clownish appearance and foreign adventures diverted the attention of world opinion from the murderous aspects of his rule. From time to time, on a whim, he let loose waves of horror, torturing and killing anyone who had so much as voiced a hint of criticism, trying them in football stadiums, where the roar of the maddened crowds drowned out the pitiful pleading for mercy of the condemned. On one occasion, his thugs shot all the 1200 inmates of Abu Salim prison in Tripoli.

True, he spent some money on building schools and hospitals, but that was a tiny part of the huge amounts of oil revenue squandered on his bizarre adventures or stolen by his family. This immensely rich country has a poor population, a single narrow road from Egypt through to Tunisia and a standard of living that is a third of ours.

You did not have to be an Arab barbarian or Muslim arch-terrorist to do what was done to him. Actually, the highly civilized Italians (Libya’s former colonial masters) did exactly

the same in 1945. When the partisans caught the fleeing Benito Mussolini, he pleaded piteously for his life, but they killed him on the spot together with his mistress. Their bodies were thrown into the street, kicked and spat upon by the crowd, and then hanged by their feet from meat hooks from the roof of a gas station, where the public threw stones at them for days on end. I don’t remember anybody in civilized Europe protesting.

Contrary to Mussolini and Gaddafi, Adolf Hitler was not caught while ignominiously trying to escape. He chose a much more dignified exit. But during his last weeks Gaddafi rather resembled Hitler, living in a world of crazy delusion, moving nonexistent troops around on the map, sure to the end of the boundless love of his people.

Nicolae Ceausescu, another bloody tyrant, had his day – or hour – in court. It was a charade, as such trials are bound to be. The kangaroo court condemned him to death and he was shot forthwith, together with his wife.

GADDAFI’S DEMISE puts an end to the debate that started months ago.

There can be no doubt any more that the vast majority of the Libyan people detested Gaddafi and welcomed the NATO campaign that helped to remove him. It was an important contribution, but the actual heavy fighting was done by the ragtag people’s army. Libya liberated itself. Even in Tripoli, it was the people who put an end to the tyranny.

I was sharply attacked by some well-meaning European leftists for blessing the awful monster called NATO. Now, in retrospect, it is quite obvious that the overwhelming – if not unanimous – opinion of the Libyans themselves welcomed the intervention.

Where did I differ from these leftists? I think that they have sewn themselves into a kind of ideological straightjacket. During the Vietnam war they arrived at a world view that was appropriate for that particular situation: there were good guys and bad guys. The good guys were the Vietnamese Communists and their allies. The bad guys were the US and its puppets. Since then, they have applied this schema to every situation around the world: South Africa, Yugoslavia, Palestine.

But every situation is different. Vietnam is not Libya, the South African problem was much more simple than ours. Great power politics may remain constant, and very unattractive at that, but there are huge differences between the various situations. I was very much against the US wars in Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq, and very much in favor of the NATO campaigns in Kosovo and Libya.

For me, the starting point of every analysis is what the people concerned want and need, and only after that do I wonder how the international schema applies to them. Working from

<sup>1</sup>I have mentioned many times, this goes right back to the founder of Zionism, Theodor Herzl, who wrote that the future Zionist state would be a part of “the wall of civilization against Asiatic barbarism”.

the inside out, so to speak, not from the outside in.

Also, I have never quite understood the dogma which seems to answer all questions: "it's all about oil". Gaddafi sold his oil on the world market, and so will his successors, on the same terms. International oil corporations are all the same to me. Is there much of a difference between the Russian Gazprom and the American Esso?

Some former Communists seem to have a kind of inherited attachment to Russia, almost automatically supporting its international positions, from Afghanistan to Serbia to Syria. Why? What is the similarity between Vladimir Putin and the Soviets? Putin does not subscribe to the dictatorship of the proletariat, he is quite satisfied with a dictatorship of himself.

IF GADDAFI'S savage end has reinforced all the Islamophobic obsessions in the West, the elections in Tunisia have made matters worse.

Help! The Islamists have won the elections! The Muslim Brotherhood will win the elections in Egypt! The Arab Spring will turn the whole region into one vast hotbed of Jihad! Israel and The West are in mortal danger!

This is all nonsense. And dangerous nonsense at that, because it may derail any sensible American and European policy towards the Arab world.

Sure, Islam is on the rise. Islamic parties have resisted the Arab dictatorships and were persecuted by them, and therefore are popular in the aftermath of their downfall – much as European Communists were very popular in France and Italy after the defeat of Fascism. From there on, support for these parties declined.

Islam is an important part of Arab civilization. Many Arabs are sincere believers. Islamic parties will certainly play an important role in any democratic Arab order, much as Jewish religious parties play – alas – an important role in Israeli politics. Most of these Arab parties are moderate, like the governing Islamic party in Turkey.

It is certainly desirable that these parties become a part of

the democratic order, rather than turning into its enemy. They must be inside the tent, otherwise the tent may collapse. I believe that this is in the best interest of Israel, too. That's why my friends and I favor Fatah-Hamas reconciliation and advocate direct negotiations between Israel and Hamas, and not only for prisoner exchanges.

Our media are outraged: the interim Prime Minister of Libya has announced that Islamic law – the sharia – will guide the enactment of new laws in his country. It seems our journalists are ignorant of the existence of an Israeli law that says that if there are legal questions for which there are no ready answers, the religious Jewish law – the Halakha - will fill the void. Moreover, there is a new bill before the Knesset that states unequivocally that the Halakha will decide legal disputes.

The outcome of the Tunisian elections was, to my mind, very positive. As expected, the moderate Islamic party won a plurality, but not a majority. It must form a coalition with secular parties and is willing to do so. These parties, totally new and practically unknown, need time to establish their identity and structure.

To add a personal note, Rachel and I went to Tunisia many times to meet Yasser Arafat, and rather liked the people. We were especially taken by the many men we saw in the streets wearing a jasmine flower behind the ear. No wonder that such people could make an almost bloodless "jasmine revolution".

If elections in other Arab countries follow this pattern, as seems probable, it will be all for the best.

THE OBAMA administration was clever enough to jump on the bandwagon of the Arab revolutions, though at the very last moment. We Israelis did not have this sense. Our Islamophobia has caused us to miss a golden opportunity for a new image among the young Arab revolutionaries.

Instead, we contrast our goodness with the barbarism of the Libyans, who have once again shown the true nature of the jungle surrounding our villa.