

Abu-Mazen's Balance Sheet

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MAHMOUD ABBAS WAS not present at my first meeting with Yasser Arafat during the siege of Beirut in the First Lebanon War. That was, it may be remembered, the first meeting ever between Arafat and an Israeli.

Some months later, in January 1983, a meeting was set up between Arafat and the delegation of the Israeli Council for Israeli-Palestinian Peace, consisting of (retired) General Matti Peled, former Director General of the Treasury Yaakov Arnon and myself.

At Tunis airport, a PLO official asked us to meet with Abbas before meeting with Arafat himself. Abbas was in charge of relations with Israelis. Until then I had heard about him only from the two senior PLO members with whom I had conducted secret talks—Said Hamami (who was murdered) and Issam Sartawi (who was murdered).

My first impression of Abu Mazen (the nom-de-guerre of Abbas) was that he was very different from Arafat, that he was indeed the total opposite. Arafat was a warm person, flamboyant, extrovert, touching, hugging. Abbas is a cool person, introvert, matter-of-fact. (Mazan, by the way, is Hebrew for “balance sheet”)

Arafat was the perfect national liberation leader, and took care to look that way. He always wore a uniform. Abbas looks like a high-school principal and always wears a European suit.

WHEN ARAFAT founded Fatah at the end of the 1950s in Kuwait, Abbas was one of the first who joined. He is one of the “founders”.

That was not easy. Almost all the Arab governments disliked the new-born group, which claimed to speak for the Palestinian people. At the time, each Arab government claimed to represent the Palestinians itself and tried to exploit the Palestinian cause for its own purposes. Arafat and his people took that cause out of their hands, and were therefore persecuted all over the Arab world.

After that first meeting with Abbas, I met him on all my visits to Tunis. I conferred first with Abbas, discussing plans for possible actions to promote peace between our two peoples. When we had agreed on possible initiatives, Abbas would say: “Now we shall submit this to the Ra'is.”

We moved to Arafat's office and put forward the proposals we had devised. When we had hardly finished, Arafat would say “Yes” or “No” without the slightest hesitation. I was always impressed by his quickness of mind and his capacity for making decisions.¹

In the presence of Arafat, Abu-Mazen's place was clear: Arafat was the leader who made the decisions, Abbas was an advisor and assistant, like all the other “Abus”— Abu-Jihad (who was murdered), Abu-Iyad (who was murdered) and Abu-Alaa (who is still alive).

On one of my visits to Tunis, I was asked to do a personal favor: to bring Abbas a book about the Kasztner trial. Abu-Mazen was writing a doctoral thesis for a university in Moscow about the cooperation between Nazis and Zionists—a theme very popular in Soviet times.²

ARAFAT DID not send Abbas to Oslo, because Abbas was already too recognizable. Instead he sent Abu-Alaa, the unknown financial expert of the PLO. The entire operation was initiated by Arafat, and I assume that Abbas had a part in it. In Israel, there was a quarrel between Yitzhak Rabin, Shimon Peres (who died this week) and Yossi Beilin about who deserved the glory, but the Oslo initiative actually came from the Palestinian side. The Palestinians initiated, the Israelis reacted. (That explains, by the way, the sad story of the Oslo agreement.)

As I have already pointed out in a previous article, the Nobel Prize committees awarded the peace prize to Arafat and Rabin. Peres' friends around the world raised hell, so the committee added Peres to the list. Justice demanded that Abbas, too, should receive the prize, but the Nobel statues allow only for three laureates. So Abbas did not get the prize. That was a glaring injustice, but Abbas kept quiet.

When Arafat returned to Palestine, all the festivities were held for him. That evening, when I made my way among the delirious crowds around Arafat's temporary HQ in Hotel Palestine, Abbas was nowhere to be seen.

Afterwards Abbas remained in the shadows. Obviously, he got other tasks and was no longer in charge of contacts with Israelis. I saw Arafat many times, and twice I served as a “human shield” in his Ramallah office, when

¹One of his Palestinian opponents told me once: “He is the leader because he is the only one courageous enough to make decisions.”

²Israel Kasztner was a Zionist functionary when the Nazis invaded Hungary. He tried to save Jews by negotiating with Adolf Eichmann.

Ariel Sharon threatened his life. I saw Abbas only two or three times.³

Rachel and Abbas were of the same age and both had spent much of their childhood in Safed. Her father had a clinic on Safed's Mount Canaan and once we speculated if as a boy Abbas had been treated by him.

WHEN ARAFAT DIED (murdered, I believe), Abbas was his natural successor. As a founding member, he was acceptable to everyone. Farouk Kaddoumi, of equal rank, is an adherent of the Baath regime in Damascus and rejected Oslo. He did not return to Palestine.

I met Abbas at Arafat's mourning ceremony at the Mukata'a. He sat next to the chief of Egyptian intelligence. After we shook hands, I saw from the corner of my eye that he tried to explain to the Egyptian who I am.

Since then, Abbas has served as the president of the "Palestinian National Authority". This is one of the most difficult jobs on earth.

A national government under occupation is compelled to tread a very narrow line. It can fall any minute on one side (collaboration with the enemy) or on the other side (suppression by the occupation authorities).

At the age of 17, when I was a member of the Irgun, my company held a mock trial for Philippe Petain, the marshal put by the Nazis at the head of the Vichy government functioning under Nazi rule in "unoccupied" Southern France.

My job was to "defend" Petain. I said that he was a French patriot, who tried to save what could be saved after the collapse of France and to ensure that France would be still there at the hour of victory.

But when victory came, Petain was condemned to death and saved only by the wisdom of his enemy, Charles de Gaulle, the leader of Free France.

There is no possibility of safeguarding freedom under occupation. Anyone trying to do so finds himself on a slippery slope, trying to satisfy the occupier and to protect his people from harm. In the course of the years the Vichy regime was compelled to collaborate with the Germans, step by step, from the persecution of the underground to the expulsion of the Jews.

Moreover, where there is an authority, even under occupation, interest groups spring up. Some people acquire an interest in the status quo and support the occupation. Pierre Laval, an opportunist French politician, rose to the top in Vichy, and quite a lot of French people gathered around him. In the end, he was executed.

NOW ABBAS finds himself in a similar situation. An impossible situation. He plays poker with the occupation authorities, when they hold all the four aces, and he has in his hand nothing but one minor card.

He sees his job as guarding the occupied Palestinian

population until the day of deliverance—until the day Israel is compelled to give up the occupation in all its forms—the settlements, the stealing of the land, the oppression.

Compelled to give up—but how?

Abbas objects to the violent resistance ("terrorism"). I believe that he is right in this. Israel has a huge army, the occupation has no moral brakes (see: Elor Azaria). The acts of the "martyrs" may reinforce the national pride of the Palestinian population, but they make the occupation worse and lead nowhere.

Abbas has adopted a strategy of international action. He is investing a large part of his resources in achieving a pro-Palestinian UN resolution, a resolution that will condemn the occupation and the settlements and recognize Palestine as a full-fledged UN member. At this moment, Binyamin Netanyahu is afraid that President Obama might use the two months of irresponsibility—between election day and the end of his term of office—to let such a resolution pass.

So what? Will this reinforce in any way the world's struggle against the Israeli occupation? Will this lower by one dollar the US aid to Israel? In the past, successive Israeli governments have ignored dozens of UN resolutions, and Israel's international position has only improved.

The Palestinians are not a stupid people. They know all these facts. A victory in the UN will gladden their hearts, but they know that it will do very little to help them in practice.

I DO not give advice to the Palestinians. I have always believed that a member of the occupying people has no right to give advice to the occupied people.

But I allow myself to think aloud, and these thoughts bring me to the conviction that the only effective method for an occupied people is civil disobedience—total non-violent popular opposition to the occupation, total disobedience to the foreign conqueror.

This method was refined by the Indian opposition to the British occupation. Its leader, Mahatma Gandhi, was an unusual personality, a moral person with a lot of practical political acumen. In India, some tens of thousands of military and civilian British personnel faced more than a million Indians. Civil disobedience put an end to the occupation.

In our country, the balance of power is extremely different. But the principle is the same: no government can function for long when faced by a population that refuses to cooperate with it in any way.

In such a struggle, violence is always implemented by the occupation. The occupation is always violent. Therefore, in a non-violent struggle of civil disobedience, many Palestinians will get killed, the general suffering will increase a lot. But such a struggle will win. It always did

³I remember a picture: once, when Arafat insisted on taking the hands of my wife Rachel and me and led us to the entrance of the building, we came across Abbas. We shook hands, exchanged civilities, and that was that.

when applied anywhere.

The world, which is expressing deep sympathy with the Palestinian people while cooperating with the occupation regime, will be compelled to intervene.

And, most importantly, the Israeli public, which is now looking at what is happening a few dozen miles from their homes as if it was happening in Honolulu, will wake up. The best of our people will join the political struggle. The weak peace camp will become strong again.

THE OCCUPATION regime is well aware of this danger. It tries to weaken Abbas by any means. It accuses Abbas of “incitement”—meaning opposition to the occupation—as if he were a brutal enemy. All this while the security forces of Abbas openly cooperate with the occupation police and army.

In practice, the occupation strengthens the Hamas regime in the Gaza Strip, which hates Abbas.

The relations between Hamas and the Israeli government go back a long way. In the first years of the occupation, when any kind of political activity in the occupied territories was strictly forbidden, only Islamists were allowed to be active. First, because it was impossible to close the mosques, and second, because the occupation authorities believed that the enmity of religious Muslims towards the secular PLO would weaken Arafat.

This illusion disappeared at the beginning of the first

intifada, when Hamas was founded and rapidly became the most militant resistance organization. But even then the occupation authorities saw in Hamas a positive element, because it divided the Palestinian struggle.

It must be remembered that the separate Gaza Strip is an Israeli invention. In the Oslo agreement, Israel undertook to open four “safe passages” between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Under the influence of the army, Rabin violated this obligation right from the beginning. As a result, the West Bank was totally cut off from the Strip—and the present situation is a direct result of that.

People everywhere wonder why Netanyahu daily denounces Abbas as an “inciter” and “sponsor of terror”, while not mentioning Hamas. To solve this mystery, one must understand that the Israeli Right does not fear war, but is afraid of international pressure—and therefore the “moderate” Abbas is much more dangerous than the “terrorist” Hamas.

CIVIL RESISTANCE will not happen in the near future. The Palestinian public is not yet ripe for it. Also, Abbas is not the suitable leader for such a struggle. He is not a Palestinian Gandhi, nor a second Mandela.

Abu-Mazen is the leader of a people trying to survive in impossible circumstances—until the situation takes a turn.