

The Aljazeera Scandal

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I ALWAYS thought this a specifically Israeli trait: whenever a scandal of national proportions breaks out, we ignore the crucial issues and focus our attention on some secondary detail. This spares us having to face the real problems and making painful decisions.

There are examples galore. The classic one centered on the question: "Who Gave the Order?" When it became known that in 1954 an Israeli spy ring had been ordered to plant bombs in US and British institutions in Egypt, in order to sabotage the effort to improve relations between the West and Gamal Abdal-Nasser, a huge crisis rocked Israel. Almost nobody asked whether the idea itself had been wise or stupid. Almost nobody asked whether it was really in the best interest of Israel to challenge the new and vigorous Egyptian leader, who was fast becoming the idol of the entire Arab world (and who had already secretly indicated that he could possibly make peace with Israel).

No, the question was solely: Who had given the order? The Minister of Defense, Pinhas Lavon, or the chief of military intelligence, Binyamin Gibli? This question rocked the nation, brought down the government and induced David Ben-Gurion to leave the Labor Party.

Recently, the Turkish flotilla scandal centered around the question: was it a good idea for commandos to slide down ropes onto the ship, or should another form of attack have been adopted? Almost nobody asked: should Gaza have been blockaded in the first place? Wasn't it smarter to start talking with Hamas? Was it a good idea to attack a Turkish ship on the high seas?

It seems that this particular Israeli way of dealing with problems is infectious. In this respect (too), our neighbors are starting to resemble us.

THE ALJAZEERA TV network followed WikiLeaks' example this week by publishing a pile of secret Palestinian documents. They paint a detailed picture of the Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations, especially during the time of Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, when the gap between the parties became much smaller.

In the Arab world, this caused a huge stir. Even while the "Jasmine Revolution" in Tunisia was still in full swing, and masses of people in Egypt were confronting the Mubarak regime, the Aljazeera leaks stirred up an intense controversy.

But what was the clash about? Not about the position of the Palestinian negotiators, not about the strategy of Mahmoud Abbas and his colleagues, its basic assumptions, its pros and cons.

No, in the Israeli way, the main question was: who leaked the documents? Who is lurking in the shadows behind the whistle-blowers? The CIA? The Mossad? What were their sinister motives?

On Aljazeera, the Palestinian leaders were accused of treason and worse. In Ramallah, the Aljazeera offices were attacked by pro-Abbas crowds. Saeb Erekat, the Palestinian chief negotiator, declared that Aljazeera was actually calling for his murder. He and others denied that they had ever made the concessions indicated in the documents. They seemed to be saying in public that such concessions would amount to betrayal – though they agreed to them in secret.

All this is nonsense. Now that the Palestinian and Israeli negotiating positions have been made public – and nobody seriously denied their authenticity – the real discussion should be about their substance.

FOR ANYONE involved in any way with Israeli-Palestinian peace-making, there was nothing really surprising in these disclosures.

On the contrary, they showed that the Palestinian negotiators are adhering strictly to the guidelines laid down by Yasser Arafat.

I know this firsthand, because I had the opportunity to discuss them with Arafat himself. That was in 1992, after the election of Yitzhak Rabin. Rachel and I went to Tunis to meet "Abu Amar", as he liked to be called. The high point of the visit was a meeting in which, besides Arafat himself, several Palestinian leaders took part – among them Mahmoud Abbas and Yasser Abed-Rabbo.

All were intensely curious about the personality of Rabin, whom I knew well, and questioned me closely about him. My remark that "Rabin is as honest as a politician can be" was greeted with general laughter, most of all from Arafat.

But the main part of the meeting was devoted to a review of the key problems of Israeli-Palestinian peace. The borders, Jerusalem, security, the refugees etc, which are now generally referred to as the "core issues".

Arafat and the others discussed it from the Palestinian point of view. I tried to convey what – in my opinion – Rabin could possibly agree to. What emerged was a kind of skeleton peace agreement.

Back in Israel, I met with Rabin at his private home on a Shabbat, in the presence of his assistant Eitan Haber, and tried to tell him what had transpired. Rather to my surprise, Rabin evaded all serious discussion. He was already thinking about Oslo.

A few years later, Gush Shalom published a detailed draft peace agreement. It was based on knowledge of the Palestinian position as disclosed in Tunis. As anyone can see on our website, it was very similar to the recent proposals of the Palestinian side as disclosed in the Aljazeera papers.

THESE ARE roughly as follows:

The borders will be based on the 1967 lines, with some minimal swaps of territory which would join to Israel the big

settlements immediately adjacent to the Green Line. These do not include the big settlements that jut deep into the West Bank, cutting the territory into pieces, such as Ma'aleh Adumim and Ariel.

All the settlements in what will become the State of Palestine will have to be evacuated. According to the papers, one of the Palestinians opened another option: that the settlers remain where they are and become Palestinian citizens. Tzipi Livni – then Foreign Minister – immediately objected, saying bluntly that all of them would be murdered. I agree that it would not be a good idea – it would cause endless friction, since these settlers sit on Palestinian land, either Palestinian private property or the land reserves of the towns and villages.

About Jerusalem, the solution would be as phrased by President Bill Clinton: What is Arab will go to Palestine, what is Jewish will be joined to Israel. This is a huge Palestinian concession, but a wise one. I was glad that they did not agree to apply this rule to Har Homa, the monstrous settlement built on what was once a beautiful wooded hill, where I spent many days and nights (and almost lost my life) in protests against its construction.

About the refugees, it is clear to any reasonable person that there will not be a mass return of millions, which would turn Israel into something else. This is a very bitter (and unjust) pill for the Palestinians to swallow – but which any Palestinian who really desires a two-state solution must accept. The question is:

how many refugees will be allowed back to Israel as a healing gesture? The Palestinians proposed 100,000. Olmert proposed 5,000. That's a big difference – but once we start to haggle about numbers, a solution can be found.

The Palestinians want an international force to be stationed in the West Bank, safeguarding their own and Israel's security. I don't remember if Arafat mentioned this to me, but I am sure that he would have agreed.

This, then, is the Palestinian peace plan – and it has not changed since Arafat came, in late 1973, to the conclusion that the two-state solution was the only viable one. The fact that Olmert and Co. did not jump to accept these terms, instead launching the deadly Cast Lead operation, speaks for itself.

THE ALJAZEERA disclosures are inopportune. Such delicate negotiations are better conducted in secret. The idea that “the people should be part of the negotiations” is naïve. The people should certainly be consulted, but not before a draft agreement lies on the table and they can decide whether they like the whole bundle or not. Before that, disclosures will only whip up a demagogic cacophony of accusations of treason (on both sides), like what is happening now.

For the Israeli peace camp, the disclosures are a blessing. They prove, as Gush Shalom put it yesterday in its weekly statement, that “We have a partner for peace. The Palestinians have no partner for peace.”