

The Doomsday Weapon

IT IS already a commonplace to say that people who don't learn from history are condemned to repeat their mistakes.

Some 1942 years ago, the Jews in the province called Palaestina launched a revolt against the Roman Empire. In retrospect, this looks like an act of madness. Palestine was a small and insignificant part of the world-wide empire which had just won a crushing victory against the rival power – the Parthian Empire (Persia) – and put down a major rebellion in Britain. What chances could the Jewish revolt have?

God knows what was going on in the mind of the "Zealots". They eliminated the moderate leaders, who warned against provoking the empire, and gained sway over the Jewish population of the country. They relied on God. Perhaps they also relied on the Jews in Rome and believed that their influence over the Senate would restrain the Emperor, Nero. Perhaps they had heard that Nero was weak and about to fall.

We know how it ended: after three years, the rebels were crushed, Jerusalem fell and the temple was burned down. The last of the Zealots committed suicide in Masada.

The Zionists did indeed try to learn from history. They acted in a rational way, did not provoke the great powers, endeavored in every situation to attain what was possible. They accepted compromises, and every compromise served them as a basis for the next surge forward. They cleverly utilized the radical stance of their adversaries and gained the sympathy of the whole world.

But since the beginning of the occupation, their mind has become clouded. The cult of Masada has become dominant. Divine promises once again start to play a role in public discourse. Large parts of the public are following the new zealots.

The next phase is also repeating itself: the leaders of Israel are starting a rebellion against the new Rome.

WHAT BEGAN as an insult to the Vice President of the United States is developing into something far bigger. The mouse has given birth to an elephant.

Lately, the ultra-right government in Jerusalem has started to treat President Barack Obama with thinly veiled contempt. The fears that arose in Jerusalem at the beginning of his term have dissipated. Obama looks to them like a paper black panther. He gave up his demand for a real settlement freeze. Every time he was spat on, he remarked that it was raining.

Yet now, ostensibly quite suddenly, the measure is full. Obama, his Vice President and his senior assistants condemn the Netanyahu government with growing severity. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has

submitted an ultimatum: Netanyahu must stop all settlement activity, East Jerusalem included; he must agree to negotiate about all core problems of the conflict, including East Jerusalem, and more.

The surprise was complete. Obama, it seems, has crossed the Rubicon, much as the Egyptian army had crossed the Suez Canal in 1973. Netanyahu gave the order to mobilize all the reserves in America and to move forward all the diplomatic tanks. All Jewish organizations in the US were commanded to join the campaign. AIPAC blew the shofar and ordered its soldiers, the Senators and Congressmen, to storm the White House.

It seems that the decisive battle has been joined. The Israeli leaders were certain that Obama would be defeated.

And then an unusual noise was heard: the sound of the doomsday weapon.

THE MAN who decided to activate it was a foe of a new kind.

David Petraeus is the most popular officer of the United States army. The four-star general, son of a Dutch sea captain who went to America when his country was overrun by the Nazis, stood out from early childhood. In West Point he was a "distinguished cadet", in Army Command and General Staff College he was No. 1. As a combat commander, he reaped plaudits. He wrote his doctoral thesis (on the lessons of Vietnam) at Princeton and served as an assistant professor for international relations in the US Military Academy.

He made his mark in Iraq, when he commanded the forces in Mosul, the most problematical city in the country. He concluded that in order to vanquish the enemies of the US he must win over the hearts of the civilian population, acquire local allies and spend more money than ammunition. The locals called him King David. His success was considered so outstanding that his methods were adopted as the official doctrine of the American army.

His star rose rapidly. He was appointed commander of the coalition forces in Iraq and soon became the chief of the Central Command of the US army, which covers the whole Middle East, except Israel and Palestine (which "belong" to the American command in Europe).

When such a person raises his voice, the American people listen. As a respected military thinker, he has no rivals.

THIS WEEK, Petraeus conveyed an unequivocal message: after reviewing the problems in his AOR (Area Of Responsibility) – which includes, among others, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, Iraq and Yemen –

he turned to what he called the "root causes of instability" in the region. The list was topped by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In his report to the Armed Services Committee he stated: "The enduring hostilities between Israel and some of its neighbors present distinct challenges to our ability to advance our interests in the AOR...The conflict foments anti-American sentiment, due to a perception of U.S. favoritism for Israel. Arab anger over the Palestinian question limits the strength and depth of U.S. partnerships with governments and peoples in the AOR and weakens the legitimacy of moderate regimes in the Arab world. Meanwhile, al-Qaeda and other militant groups exploit that anger to mobilize support. The conflict also gives Iran influence in the Arab world through its clients, Lebanese Hizballah and Hamas."

Not content with that, Petraeus sent his officers to present his conclusions to the Joint Chiefs of Staff,

In other words: Israeli-Palestinian peace is not a private matter between the two parties, but a supreme national interest of the USA. That means that the US must give up its one-sided support for the Israeli government and impose the two-state solution.

The argument as such is not new. Several experts have said more or less the same in the past. (Immediately after the 9/11 attacks, I wrote in a similar vein and prophesied that the US would change its policy. It did not happen then.) But now this is being stated in an official document written by the responsible American commander.

The Netanyahu government immediately went into damage-limitation mode. Its spokespersons declared that Petraeus represents a narrow military approach, that he doesn't understand political matters, that his reasoning is faulty. But it is not this that made people in Jerusalem break out into cold sweat.

AS IS well known, the pro-Israel lobby dominates the American political system without limits – almost. Every American politician and senior official is mortally afraid of it. The slightest deviation from the strict AIPAC line is tantamount to political suicide.

But in the armor of this political Goliath there is a chink. Like Achilles' heel, the immense might of the pro-Israel lobby has a vulnerable point that, when touched, can neutralize its power.

It was illustrated by the Jonathan Pollard affair. This American-Jewish employee of a sensitive intelligence agency spied for Israel. Israelis consider him a national hero, a Jew who did his duty to his people. But for the US intelligence community, he is a traitor who endangered the lives of many American agents. Not satisfied with a routine penalty, it induced the court to impose a life sentence. Since then, all American presidents have refused the requests of successive Israeli governments to commute the sentence. No president dared to confront his intelligence chiefs in this matter.

But the most significant side of this affair is reminiscent of the famous words of Sherlock Holmes about the dogs that did not bark. AIPAC did not bark. The entire American Jewish community fell silent. Almost nobody raised their voice for poor Pollard.

Why? Because most American Jews are ready to do anything – just anything – for the government of Israel. With one exception: they will not do anything that appears to hurt the security of the United States. When the flag of security is hoisted, the Jews, like all Americans, snap to attention and salute. The Damocles sword of suspicion of disloyalty hangs above their heads. For them, this is the ultimate nightmare: to be accused of putting the security of Israel ahead of the security of the US. Therefore it is important for them to repeat endlessly the mantra that the interests of Israel and the US are identical.

And now comes the most important general of the US Army and says that this is not so. The policy of the present Israeli government is endangering the lives of American soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan.

FOR NOW, this is being said only as a side remark, in a military document that has not been widely aired. But the sword has been drawn from its scabbard – and American Jews have started to tremble at the distant rumble of an approaching earthquake.

This week, Netanyahu's brother-in-law has used our own doomsday weapon. He declared that Obama is an "anti-Semite". The official newspaper of the Shas party has asserted that Obama is really a Muslim. They represent the radical right and its allies, who argue in speech and in writing that "Hussein" Obama is a Jew-hating black who must be beaten in the coming congressional elections and in the next presidential ones.

(Yet an important poll in Israel published yesterday shows that the Israeli public is far from convinced by these insinuations: the vast majority believes that Obama's treatment of Israel is fair. Indeed, Obama got higher marks than Netanyahu.)

If Obama decides to fight back and activate his doomsday weapon – the accusation that Israel puts the lives of American servicemen at risk – this would have catastrophic consequences for Israel.

For the time being, this is only a shot across the bow – a warning shot fired by a warship in order to induce another vessel to follow its instructions. The warning is clear. Even if the present crisis is somehow damped down, it will inevitably flare up again and again as long as the present coalition in Israel stays in power.

When the movie "Hurt Locker" won its awards, the entire American public was united in its concern about the lives of its soldiers in the Middle East. If this public becomes convinced that Israel is sticking a knife in their back, it will be a disaster for Netanyahu. And not just for him.