

The Third Intifada?

Uri Avnery

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IS THIS THE third intifada? This question was raised this week by a number of Israeli security experts. And not only by them—their Palestinian colleagues were almost as perplexed.

All over the West Bank, Palestinian youth threw stones at Israeli soldiers. All the 3500 Palestinians in Israeli prisons took part in a three-day hunger strike.

The immediate reason was the death of a young Palestinian man during interrogation by the Shin Bet. The autopsy showed no reason for the death. It was no heart attack, as first (and automatically) claimed by Israeli officials and their stooges, the so-called “*military correspondents*”. So was it torture, as practically all Palestinians believe?

Then there were the four prisoners on a hunger strike which has already lasted 150 days (mitigated by infusions). Since almost every Palestinian family has now—or had in the past—at least one member in prison, this generates much excitement.

So is this IT?

THE UNCERTAINTY of security officials stems from the fact that both the first and the second intifada broke out in an unexpected way. Both the Israeli and the Palestinian leaderships were taken by surprise.

The Israeli surprise was especially-well, surprising. The West Bank and the Gaza Strip were, and still are, full of Israeli informers. Decades of occupation have allowed the Security Service to recruit thousands of them by bribery or blackmail. So how did they fail to know?

The Palestinian leadership, then in Tunis, was equally in the dark. It took Yasser Arafat several days to realize what was happening and laud the “Stone Children”.

The reason for the surprise was that both intifadas were completely spontaneous. No one planned them. Because of this, no informer could warn his handlers.

The trigger for the first one was a road accident. In December 1987, an Israeli driver killed several Palestinian workers near Gaza. All hell broke loose. The second was triggered by a deliberate Israeli provocation after the failure of the 2000 Camp David conference.

The Israeli army was quite unprepared for the First Intifada. Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin famously exclaimed “Break their bones!” which some commanders took literally and carried out faithfully. A lot of arms and

legs were broken with rifle butts.

Though the second intifada was also unexpected, this time the army was prepared for any event. Troops were trained in advance. No bones were broken this time. Instead, sharpshooters were placed near unit commanding officers. When a non-violent demonstration approached, the officer pointed out the ringleader, and the sharpshooter killed him. Very soon the non-violent uprising turned into a very violent one.

I don’t know what the army plans for the third intifada. But one can be certain that even if it starts as a non-violent mass protest, it will not stay so for long.

TWO WEEKS ago, the Israeli Channel 10 showed a documentary about Ariel Sharon’s manipulation of the Second Intifada.

It started when Prime Minister Ehud Barak allowed Opposition Chief Sharon to visit the Temple Mount, accompanied by hundreds of policemen. Since Sharon was a pork-eating atheist, there was no religious motive for the visit. It was a provocation, pure and simple.

When Sharon approached the Muslim shrines, he was greeted with stones. The police killed the stone-throwers with live ammunition. And lo and behold, the Second Intifada was on the way.

Arafat in far-away Tunis had nothing to do with it. But once the intifada had started, he embraced it. The local Fatah cadres took command.

Soon after, Sharon came to power. He did everything possible to stoke the fires. In the documentary, his closest assistants were interviewed at length and disclosed that Sharon did this quite deliberately.

His aim was to cause a general uprising, in order to give him a legitimate reason for re-conquering the West Bank, after parts of it were turned over to the Palestinian authority in the Oslo agreements. And indeed, a large number of suicide attacks and other outrages provided the necessary national and international legitimization for Operation Defensive Shield, in which Israeli troops re-entered all West Bank towns and spread death and destruction. In particular, the Palestinian Authority’s offices were systematically ransacked, including the Education and Social Services ministries. Arafat was surrounded and isolated in the Ramallah Mukata’ah (“Compound”), and kept a virtual

prisoners for years, till his murder.

In the film, the advisors readily admitted that Sharon did not even contemplate a political initiative to end the intifada—his sole aim was to vanquish the Palestinian resistance by brute force. During this intifada 4944 Palestinians were killed, as against 1011 Israelis. (In the preceding intifada, 1593 Palestinians and 84 Israelis found their death.)

Israelis believe that Sharon's brutal methods were a great success. The Second Intifada sputtered out.

WILL THERE be a Third Intifada? If so, when? Has it already begun or were the recent events only a kind of general rehearsal?

No one knows, least of all our security forces. There is no reliable information from the agents. Again, everything is spontaneous.

One thing is certain: Mahmoud Abbas, Arafat's heir, is very much afraid of it. He waited for a few days, and then, once he was sure that this was not a general uprising, he ordered his American-trained police forces to intervene and put an end to the demonstrations.

More than that, he publicly condemned the outbreaks and accused Binyamin Netanyahu of deliberately fomenting them.

One of the causes for this suspicion was that on Friday the Israeli police did not prevent young Palestinians from reaching the Temple Mount ("Haram al-Sharif"), as they do frequently when there is the slightest suspicion of coming unrest.

I put the question to a circle of friends: Assuming for a moment that Abbas is right, what might have been Netanyahu's motive?

One answered: He is afraid that Barak Obama will, in his upcoming visit to Jerusalem, demand the resumption of the "peace process". Netanyahu will tell him that, in view of the new intifada, that is impossible.

Another volunteered: Netanyahu will tell the President that Abbas has lost his authority and therefore is not a viable partner.

Yet another: Netanyahu will tell the Israeli public that we have an emergency at hand, so we need to set up a Government of National Unity at once. All Zionist parties must be pushed by their voters to join.

And so forth.

BE THAT as it may, the pertinent question is whether a spontaneous outbreak is in the offing.

Frankly, I don't know. I doubt if anyone does.

The absence of any genuine peace initiative makes another intifada probable at some point. How long can the harsh occupation continue without a serious challenge?

On the other hand, it does not appear that the great mass of the Palestinian people is mentally prepared for a fight. In the occupied territories, a new bourgeoisie has come to life, which has a lot to lose. Under the auspices of the US, the Palestinian Prime Minister, Salam Fayyad, has succeeded in stimulating some sort of economy, in which quite a number flourish.

The prospect of another round of violence does not appeal to these people, nor does it attract poor people, who are already fully occupied with their daily survival. To get these people to rise up, you need an extremely provocative event. This can happen tomorrow morning, or within weeks or months, or not at all.

Abbas accuses Hamas of fomenting unrest in the West Bank, which is governed by Fatah, while Hamas itself, at the same time, is keeping the cease-fire in its own dominion, the Gaza Strip. Actually, both regimes, each in its own part of Palestine, are interested in quiet while accusing the other of collaborating with the occupation.¹

THE MORE people on both sides talk about the Third Intifada, the less it is likely to happen. As the Germans used to say, Revolutions foretold are not going to happen.

But if there is no end to the occupation in sight, the Third Intifada will break out one day, quite suddenly, when nobody has been talking about it, when everybody on both sides was thinking about other things.

¹A century and a half ago, Karl Marx denounced the efforts of his socialist adversary, Ferdinand Lassalle, to set up workers' cooperatives. Marx asserted that once the workers had something to lose, they would not rise up anymore. If you want a revolution, Lenin is supposed to have said, "*The worse things are, the better*".