

Wine, Blood and Gasoline

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KAFR KANNA, A village near Nazareth, is probably the place where Jesus – according to the New Testament—turned water into wine. Now it is the Arab village where the Israeli police is turning stones into blood.

On the fateful day, the police was confronting a group of young Arabs protesting against the Israeli efforts to change the status quo on the Temple Mount (known to Muslims as “the Noble Sanctuary”). Such demonstrations were taking place that day in many Arab towns and villages all over Israel, and especially in occupied East Jerusalem.

According to the first police statement, the 22-year old Arab, Kheir a-Din Hamdan, attacked the police with a knife. In self defense, they had no choice but to shoot and kill him.

As so often with police reports, this was a pack of lies.

UNFORTUNATELY (for the police), the incident was recorded by security cameras. The pictures clearly showed Hamdan approaching a police car and beating on its windows with something, possibly a knife. When he saw that this had no effect, Hamdan turned around and started to walk away.

At that moment, the policemen got out of the car and immediately started to shoot at the back of Hamdan, who was hit and fell to the ground. The officers surrounded him and, after some hesitation, obviously a consultation between them, started to drag the wounded youngster on the ground towards the patrol car, as if he were a sack of potatoes. They dumped him on the floor of the car and drove away (to a hospital, it appears), with their feet on or near the dying man.

The pictures show clearly, for everyone to see, that the policemen violated the standing police orders for opening fire: they were in no immediate mortal danger, they did not shout a warning, they did not shoot first in the air, they did not aim at the lower part of his body. They did not call an ambulance. The youngster bled to death. It was a cold-blooded execution.

There was an outcry. Arab citizens rioted in many places. Under pressure, the Police Investigation board (which belongs to the Ministry of Justice) started an investigation. The first investigation already uncovered several facts which put an even more severe face on the incident.

It appeared that before the cameras caught the scene, the police had arrested Hamdan's cousin and put him into the car. Obviously, Kheir a-Din wanted to release the cousin and therefore beat on the car. The cousin saw him being shot and dumped on the floor of the car in which he was sitting.

The first reaction of the police command was to justify the behavior of the policemen, whose names and faces were withheld. They were spirited away to some other police unit.

I DESCRIBE the incident at length, not because it is unique but on the contrary—because it is so typical. What was special about it was only the unnoticed presence of the camera.

Several cabinet ministers lauded the exemplary behavior of the police in this incident. This can be dismissed as the publicity-hunting of extreme right-wing demagogues, who believe that their voters approve of all and any shooting of Arabs. They should know.

However, one statement cannot be ignored: the one made by the Minister of Home Security.

A few days before the incident, Minister Yitzhak Aharonowitz, a protégé of Avigdor Lieberman and himself a former police officer, declared publicly that he did not want any terrorist to survive after an attack.

That is a manifestly illegal statement. Indeed, it is a call for crimes. Under the law, policemen are not allowed to shoot “terrorists” or anybody else after they are taken prisoner, especially when they are wounded and do not present any “mortal danger”.

Aharonowitz always seems a nice guy. He has a knack of popping up before the cameras after every newsworthy incident—whether a severe road accident, a political crime or a fire. God knows how he manages that.

In actual fact, the Minister for Home Security (formerly known as Minister of Police) has practically no function. Since the days of the British Mandate, the commander of the police force has been the Inspector General, a uniformed professional officer. The sole police function of the minister is to recommend to the government the appointment of a new commander.

But for ordinary policemen, a statement by the minister sounds like an order. Quite probably, the irresponsible

utterance of the minister was a direct incitement to the crime of Kafr Kanna. Especially since neither the Inspector General nor the Prime Minister denounced it.

All this reminds one of the fateful 1984 utterance of then Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir, who also declared that no terrorist should stay alive after an attack. The direct result was the "Bus Line 300" affair, in which four Arab boys, without any weapons, hijacked an Israeli bus. They were stopped, two were shot during the recapture, and two were taken alive. One of them was murdered by the chief of the Shin Bet himself, Avraham Shalom, who crushed his skull with a rock. When the pictures were published (first by me), Shalom and his colleagues were pardoned. Shamir denied any responsibility.

BACK TO today's events. Is this the long-awaited Third Intifada? Yes? No?

Army and police officers, politicians and especially media commentators are busy trying to answer this question. (Intifada means literally "shaking off".)

This is not just a mere semantic game. The definition carries with it operational consequences.

As a matter of fact, the entire country is now aflame. East Jerusalem is already a war zone, with daily demonstrations, riots and bloodshed. In Israel proper, since the Kafr Kanna killing Arab citizens are also mounting daily strikes and demonstrations. In the West Bank, there were some demonstrations and a fatal stabbing, after which an Arab was shot and killed.

Mahmoud Abbas is doing everything in his power to prevent a general uprising, which might quite well endanger his regime. But pressure from below is mounting. Abbas refused to meet Netanyahu in Amman.

Popular wisdom in Israel has already found a name for the situation: "Intifada of Individuals". For the Israeli security chiefs, that is a nightmare. They are ready for an

organized Intifada. They know how to quash it by force, and, if necessary, by more force. But what to do with an Intifada which is entirely made by isolated individuals, with no orders from any organization, with no grouping that can be infiltrated by the collaborators of the Shin Bet net of informers?

An individual Arab listens to the news, is incensed by the latest outrage against the Holy Shrines and drives his car into the nearest group of Israeli soldiers or civilians. Or takes a knife from the kitchen of the Israeli restaurant where he washes the dishes and stabs people in the street. No prior information. No network to be infiltrated. Quite frustrating.

The center of the storm is the Temple Mount. The al-Aqsa ("far away") Mosque, the third holiest place of Islam, is under siege. At one point, Israeli soldiers entered the mosque (with their boots on) in pursuit of stone-throwing demonstrators.

WHERE ARE we going?

For decades now, a group of Israeli zealots has been busy planning for a new Jewish Temple to be built in place of the al-Aqsa and the magnificent Dome of the Rock. They are stitching garments for priests and making the necessary preparations for animal sacrifices.

Until recently, they were considered simply a curiosity. Not anymore.

Several cabinet ministers and Knesset members have entered the holy enclosure to pray, contrary to the status quo. Throughout the Islamic world, this has aroused alarm. Palestinians in East Jerusalem, the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and in Israel proper are furious.

Netanyahu promised King Abdallah II to restore quiet. But he is doing the opposite.

Jesus turned water into wine. Netanyahu is turning water into gasoline and pouring it on the flames.