

Weep, Beloved Country

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SOMETIMES, A SMALL INCIDENT can pierce the darkness and reveal a frightening picture.

This happened last Sunday in Beersheba, the capital of the Negev.

The picture was frightening indeed.

THE INCIDENT started as a routine attack, one of many we have become used to in recent weeks. Some call it “the Third Intifada”, some speak of a “Terror Wave”, some are satisfied with “Escalation”.

It is a new stage in the old conflict. Its symbol is the knife-wielding lone Palestinian individual—either from East Jerusalem, the West Bank or Israel proper.

It is not connected with any of the Palestinian parties. Before the deed, the attacker had no known connection with any militant group. He or she is completely unknown to the Israeli Security Service. Hence it is impossible to prevent such actions.

One morning the future shahid wakes up, feels that the time has come, takes a large kitchen knife, goes to a Jewish neighborhood and stabs the nearest Israeli Jew, preferably a soldier, but when there are no soldiers around—any Jewish civilian, man, woman or even child.

The attacker knows well that they will probably be killed on the spot. They want to become a shahid—a martyr, literally “witness to the faith”.

In earlier intifadas, the attackers were generally members of organizations or cells. These cells were invariably infiltrated by paid traitors, and almost all perpetrators were caught, sooner or later. Many such acts were prevented.

The present outbreak is different. Since they are carried out by lone individuals, no spies are aware of them. The acts cannot be stopped in advance. They can occur anywhere, anyplace—In Jerusalem, in the other occupied territories, in the heart of Israel proper. Any Israeli, anywhere, can be knifed.

To get the whole picture, one must add to this the stone-throwing groups of Palestinian youngsters and children along the highways. The groups form suddenly, spontaneously, generally composed of local teenagers, and throw stones and fire-bombs at passing cars—first making sure that they are Jewish Israeli. Often they are joined by mere children, who are eager to prove their courage and devotion

to Allah. One caught was 13 years old.

Stone-throwing incidents sometimes lead to the death of drivers, who lose control of their cars. The army responds with tear gas, rubber-coated steel bullets (which cause acute pain but rarely kill) and live ammunition.

THE OUTBREAK—which does not yet have a definite name—started several weeks ago in East Jerusalem. As usual, one may add.

The center of the Arab Old City is the holy place called by the Jews “the Temple Mount” and by the Arabs “Haram al-Sharif”—the Holy Shrine. It is where the ancient Jewish temples once stood.

After the Second Temple was destroyed by the Romans some 1945 years ago, the place was desecrated by the Christians who turned it into a dunghill. When it was conquered by the Muslims in 635, the humane Khalif Omar ordered it cleaned. Two holy Muslim buildings were erected—the beautiful Dome of the Rock, with its conspicuous golden dome, and the even holier al-Aqsa Mosque, the third holiest mosque in Islam.

If one wants to cause trouble, this is the place to start. The cry that al-Aqsa is in danger arouses every Palestinian, and every Muslim around the world. It excites moderately religious Muslims (as most Arabs are) as well as religious fanatics. It is a call to arms, to self-sacrifice.

This has happened several times in the past. The terrible “events” of 1929, in which the ancient Jewish community in Hebron was massacred, were started by a Jewish provocation at the Western Wall, part of the wall that encloses the Mount. The second intifada broke out because Ariel Sharon led a provocative demonstration on the Mount, with the express permission of the then Labor Party Prime Minister, Ehud Barak.

The present trouble started with visits by Jewish extreme right-wing leaders, including a minister and members of the Knesset, to the Temple Mount. This in itself is not forbidden.¹ The mount is a paramount tourist attraction.

To regulate things, something called the Status Quo is in place. When the Israeli army occupied East Jerusalem in the 1967 Six-day war, it was decided that the Temple Mount enclosure, though now under Israeli rule, would

¹Except by Orthodox Jewish law, because ordinary Jews are not allowed to tread where once the Holy of Holies was located.

be run by Muslims under Jordanian jurisdiction. (Why Jordanian? Because Israel did not agree to Palestinian jurisdiction.) Jews were allowed to enter the enclosure, but not to pray there.

Binyamin Netanyahu maintains that the Status Quo was not broken. But lately groups of fanatical right-wing Israelis have entered the enclosure, protected by the Israeli police, and prayed. For the Muslims, that was a breach of the status.

Moreover, much publicity has been given to Jewish groups who are preparing to rebuild the Jewish Temple after destroying the Muslim shrines. The clothes and instruments prescribed by the Bible are being prepared by fanatics.

In normal times, at a normal place, this could be settled peacefully. But not on the Temple Mount, and not now, with Jewish settlers starting to secure footholds in the Arab villages surrounding the Shrines. All over the occupied territories and among the Arab citizens of Israel the cry went up: the Holy Places are in danger. The Israeli leaders shouted back that this was all a pack of lies.

Young Palestinians took up the knives and started stabbing Israelis, knowing full well that they would probably be shot dead on the spot. Israeli leaders called upon Jewish citizens to bear arms at all times and shoot at once when they see an attack. There are now several such incidents every day. Altogether, this month eight Jews have been killed, together with 18 suspects and 20 other Palestinians.

This, then, is the background of the Beersheba outrage.

IT HAPPENED in the central bus station of the desert capital, a town of about 250,000 Jews, mostly of Oriental background, surrounded by numerous Bedouin townships and encampments.

Three persons figure in the incident.

The first was a 19 year old soldier, Omri Levi. He got down from a bus and entered the large station building, when he was killed by an Arab attacker, who grabbed his weapon. We know very little about the soldier, just a nice-looking 19 year-old.

The second person was the attacker, 21 year old Muhammad al-Okbi. Surprisingly, he was a Bedouin from the surroundings with no security-risk past. Surprising, because many Bedouins volunteer for the Israeli army, serve in the Police or study at Beersheba University. This does not prevent the Israeli government trying to grab the land

of the tribes and re-settle them in crowded little townships.

Nobody knows why this boy of the desert decided, on waking up that day, to become a Shahid and go on a rampage. His extended family seems as perplexed as everyone else. It seems that he had become very religious and was reacting to the al-Aqsa incidents. Also, like all Bedouins in the Negev, he was certainly upset by the government's efforts to dispossess them.

So he shot at the bystanders—either with a pistol in his possession or with the weapon he had grabbed from the soldier. After reading tens of thousands of words, I am still not quite sure.

BUT THE person who drew the most attention was neither the soldier nor the assailant, but the third victim.

His name was Haftom Zarhim, a 29 year old refugee from Eritrea—one of 50,000 or so Africans who illegally crossed the border into the Negev. He was completely innocent. He just happened to enter the building behind the assailant, and some bystanders mistook him for an accomplice. He did not look Jewish.

He was shot and wounded. While lying on the floor, bleeding and helpless, the mob surrounded him, kicking him from all sides, several kicking his head. He arrived dead at the hospital. The entire scene was gleefully photographed by a bystander with his smartphone and shown on all TV news programs.

There is no way around it: this was an incident of vicious racism, pure and simple. The barbaric treatment of wounded Palestinian assailants by an excited mob can somehow be understood—not excused, not condoned, but at least understood. We have a conflict that has already lasted more than 130 years, on both sides several generations have been brought up in mutual hatred.

But asylum seekers? They are almost universally hated. Why? Only because they are foreigners, non-Jews. Even the color of their skins cannot provide a full explanation—after all we now have quite a number of dark-skinned Ethiopian Jews, who are accepted as “ours”.

The gruesome lynching of the dying Haftom was totally ugly, totally detestable. It could lead one to despair of Israel—if it were not for one anonymous middle-aged bystander, who returned to the scene two days later, retelling the story on TV, admitting that he could not sleep since then—and weeping.