

Metro Gaza

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TEL AVIV HAS no metro. It has been discussed for decades. Successive mayors have promised it. Alas, still no metro.

When the Israeli army entered the Gaza strip and found there an astounding system of underground tunnels, an idea made the rounds: Why not invite Hamas to build the Tel Aviv metro? They have the expertise, the technology, the planners, the manpower.

But this war is no joke. It is a terrible tragedy.

AFTER 29 DAYS of fighting (until now), who has won?

It is, of course, much too early to draw final conclusions. The ceasefire has blown up. It will take months and years to sum up all the consequences. But Israeli popular wisdom has already drawn its own conclusions: it is a draw.

This conclusion, by itself, is a kind of miracle. For an entire month, Israeli citizens have been bombarded by a barrage of propaganda. Daily, hourly, they were subject to an endless stream of brainwashing.

The political and military leaders dictated a picture of victory. Tanks and troop carriers coming out of the Gaza Strip have been ordered to fly large flags. All photos of troops leaving the Strip showed happily smiling soldiers.¹

According to the official line, our glorious army has achieved all its goals. Mission accomplished. Hamas has been beaten. As one of the tame “military correspondents” put it: *“Hamas is crawling on all fours to the ceasefire!”*

It was therefore a great surprise that in the first poll after the first bout of fighting, 51% of the Israeli Jewish public responded that the war had ended in a draw. Only 36% answered that we had won, while 6% believe that it ended in a victory for Hamas.

WHEN A guerrilla organization with at most 10,000 fighters achieves a draw with one of the mightiest armies in the world, equipped with the most ultra-modern weapons, that is by itself a kind of victory.

Hamas has not only shown a lot of courage during the fighting, but also surprising ingenuity in preparing for this campaign. It is still standing upright.

The Israeli army, on the other hand, has shown very little imagination. It was quite unprepared for the maze of

tunnels. The vastly successful “Iron Dome” anti-rocket defense was developed by civilians and installed eight years ago by a civilian Minister of Defense against the express wishes of the army. Without this defense, the war would have looked very different.

Indeed, as a commentator dared to write, the army has become a heavy, cumbersome, conservative machine. It followed its established routine, without employing special forces. Its doctrine was, in essence, to pound the civilian population into submission, causing as much killing and destruction as possible, so as to deter the “resistance” as much and as long as possible. In Israel, the terrible pictures of death and destruction did not evoke compassion. On the contrary. People were proud of it.

In the end, both sides were thoroughly exhausted. Yet in the Cairo ceasefire negotiations, Hamas did not surrender.

For the Israeli leadership, the only alternative to retreat was the conquest of the entire Gaza Strip. This would have enabled it to exterminate Hamas physically and dismantle its infrastructure. But the army strenuously objected and convinced the political leadership, too. An estimated thousand Israeli soldiers would have been killed, the entire Strip would have been turned into ruins.

32 years ago, the Begin-Sharon duo was faced with the same dilemma. The conquest of Western Beirut would have cost an estimated 800 Israeli soldiers. Like the Netanyahu-Ya'alon duo now, they decided against it.

Israeli society has no stomach for so many casualties. And the international outcry against the civilian carnage in Gaza would have been too much.

So now Netanyahu has done what he had sworn never to do: he has conducted negotiations with the “despicable terrorist organization”—Hamas.

THERE IS a mental illness called paranoia vera. Its main symptom: the patient takes a crazy assumption (the earth is flat, Kennedy was killed by extraterrestrials, the Jews rule the world) and builds an entire logical system around it. The more logical the system is, the sicker is the patient.

Israel's current paranoia concerns Hamas. The assumption is that Hamas is an evil jihadist terrorist organization,

¹In my imagination I see the troops training for the exit, with the sergeant-major shouting: *“You there, Private Cohen, correct your smile!”*

bent on the annihilation of Israel. As one journalist put it this week: “a gang of psychopaths”.

The entire policy of Israel is based on this assumption. So was the war.

You can't talk with Hamas. You can't make peace with it. You must annihilate it.

This demonic picture has no connection with the real world.

I don't like Hamas. I don't like religious parties in general—not in Israel, not in the Arab world, not anywhere. I would never vote for one.

But Hamas is an integral part of Palestinian society. In the last internationally supervised Palestinian election it won a majority. True, it took power in the Gaza strip by force, but only after winning a clear electoral majority in the Strip, too.

Hamas is not “jihadist” in the sense of al-Qaeda or ISIS. It is not fighting for a world-wide Caliphate. It is a Palestinian party, totally devoted to the Palestinian cause. It calls itself “the resistance”. It did not impose religious law (the “sharia”) on the population.

Ah, but what about the Hamas Charter, which demands the destruction of the State of Israel and contains virulent anti-Semitic statements?

For me, this is frustratingly *deja vu*. The PLO had a Charter that also called for the destruction of Israel. It was paraded around endlessly in Israeli propaganda. A respected professor and former army intelligence chief, Yehoshafat Harkabi, spoke for years about nothing else. Only after the signing of the Oslo agreement between Israel and the PLO were the relevant clauses of this document formally struck out, in the presence of President Bill Clinton.

Because of religious restrictions, Hamas itself cannot sign a peace agreement. But, like religious people everywhere (especially Jews and Christians), it has found ways around God's commandments. The founder of Hamas, the paralyzed Sheik Ahmad Yassin (who wrote the Charter and was assassinated by Israel) proposed a 30-year Hudna. A Hudna is a truce sanctified by Allah, which can be renewed until the Last Judgment.

Gush Shalom, the Israeli peace organization to which I belong, first demanded eight years ago that our government start talking with Hamas. We ourselves had a series of friendly discussions with several Hamas leaders. The current official line of Hamas is that if Mahmoud Abbas succeeds in reaching a peace agreement with Israel, Hamas will accept it—provided it is ratified by a referendum.

Unfortunately, there is very little hope that Israel will be cured of this paranoia soon.

ASSUMING THAT this war will soon be over, what will remain?

The war hysteria that has submerged Israel during this war has brought with it an odious wave of fascism. Lynch mobs have hunted Arabs in Jerusalem, Journalists like Gideon Levy need bodyguards, university professors who dared to advocate peace were censored (justifying a worldwide academic boycott), artists who voiced mild dissent were dismissed.

Some people believe that this is a milestone in the decay of Israeli democracy. I still hope that the evil wave will recede. But something will surely remain. Fascism has been sanctioned in the mainstream discourse.

One symptom of fascism is the “knife in the back” legend. Adolf Hitler used it all the way to power. Our glorious army was on the verge of victory, when a cabal of (Jewish) politicians stuck a knife in its back. One can already hear this now in Israel. The brave soldiers could have conquered all of the Gaza strip, if Netanyahu and his stooges—the Defense Minister and the Chief of Staff—had not given the order for an ignominious retreat.

At the moment, Netanyahu is at the height of his popularity. An overwhelming 77% of the Jewish citizens polled approve of his conduct of the war. But this can change overnight. The criticism voiced now in whispers, even in his own government, may break into the open.

In the end, Netanyahu may be devoured by the very same super-patriotic flames that he has stoked.

The awful pictures of devastation and death coming out of Gaza have made a profound impression abroad. They cannot be simply erased. Anti-Israeli sentiment will remain, some of it tinged with outright anti-Semitism. Israel's (false) claim of being “the nation-state of the Jewish people” and the almost total identification of Diaspora Jews with Israel will inevitably lead to blaming all Jews for Israel's misdeeds.

The impact on Arabs is far worse. For every child killed, for every home destroyed, new “terrorists” will surely grow up.

THERE MIGHT have been some positive results too.

This war has created temporarily an unlikely coalition of Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the Palestinian Authority.

Two months ago, Abbas was the punch bag of Netanyahu. Now he is the pet of Netanyahu and Israeli public opinion. At the same time, paradoxically, Abbas and Hamas have also been drawn closer together.

This could be a unique opportunity to start a serious peace process, in the wake of the solution of the Gaza Strip problems.

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