

Son of Death

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THE WAR WAS over. Families returned to their kibbutzim near Gaza. Kindergartens opened up again. A ceasefire was in force and extended again and again. Obviously, both sides were exhausted.

And then, suddenly, the war came back.

What happened? Well, Hamas launched rockets against Beersheba in the middle of the ceasefire.

Why? No why. You know how the terrorists are. Bloodthirsty. They can't help it. Just like scorpions.

But it is not so simple.

THE CAIRO talks were near success, or so it seemed. But Binyamin Netanyahu was in trouble. He hid the Egyptian draft agreement for a long ceasefire even from his cabinet colleagues. They learned about it only from the media, which disclosed it from Palestinian sources.

Apparently, the draft said that the blockade would be greatly relaxed, if not officially ended. Talks about the building of a port and airport were to start within a month.

What? What did Israel get out of this? After all the shooting and killing, with 64 Israeli soldiers dead, after all the grandiose speeches about our resounding victory, was that all? No wonder Netanyahu tried to hide the document.

The Israeli delegation was called home without signing. The exasperated Egyptian mediators got another 24 hour extension of the ceasefire. It was to expire at midnight on Tuesday, but everybody on both sides expected it to be extended again and again. And then it happened.

At about 16.00 hours, three rockets were fired at Beer-sheba and fell into open spaces. No warning sirens. Curiously enough, Hamas denied having launched them, and no other Palestinian organization took responsibility. This was strange. After every previous launching from Gaza, some Palestinian organization has always proudly claimed credit.

As usual, Israeli airplanes promptly started to retaliate and bombed buildings in the Gaza Strip. As usual, rockets rained down on Israel. (I heard the interceptions in Tel Aviv).

BUSINESS AS usual? Not quite.

First it became known that an hour before the rockets came in, the Israeli population near Gaza was warned by

the army to prepare their shelters and "safe spaces".

Then it appeared that the first Gaza building hit belonged to the family of a Hamas military commander. Three people were killed, among them a baby and his mother.

And then the news spread: It was the family of Mohammed Deif, the commander of the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, the military wing of Hamas.¹ Among those killed this Tuesday were Deif's wife and baby son. But it seems that Deif himself was not there.

That in itself is no wonder. Deif has survived at least four attempts to assassinate him. He has lost an eye and several limbs, but always came out alive.

All around him, his successive commanders, political and military peers and subordinates, dozens of them, have been assassinated throughout the years. But he has led a charmed life.

Now he heads the Israeli hit list, the most wanted and hunted Palestinian activist. He is the No. 1 "Son of Death", a rather biblical appellation used in Israel for those marked for assassination.

Like most inhabitants of the Gaza Strip, Deif is a child of refugees from Israel. His family comes from the village Kawkaba, now in Israel, not far from Gaza. I passed through it in the 1948 war, before it was razed to the ground.

For the Israeli Security Service, he is a prize for which it is well worth breaking the ceasefire and reigniting the war.

FOR MANY security agencies around the world, including the American and the Russian, assassination is a sport and an art.

Israel claims to hold the gold medal.

An assassination is a complicated operation. It requires a lot of time, expertise, patience and luck. The operators have to recruit informers near the victim, install electronic devices, obtain precise information about his every movement, execute their design within minutes once the opportunity presents itself.

Because of this, there is no time for confirmation from above. Perhaps the Security Service (usually called Shin Bet) got permission from Netanyahu, its sole political

¹Qassam was a Palestinian hero, the first rebel against British rule in Palestine in the 1930s. He was hunted down and killed by the British.

chief, perhaps not.

They obviously were informed that Deif was visiting his family. That was a golden opportunity. For months, indeed for years, Deif has been living underground, in the literal sense—somewhere in the maze of tunnels his men had dug beneath the Strip. He was never sighted.

Since the beginning of this war, all the other prominent Hamas leaders have also been living under the ground. From Ismail Haniyeh down, not one of them has been seen. The unlimited command of the air by Israeli planes and drones makes this advisable. Hamas has no anti-air weapons.

It seems to me highly unlikely that Deif would risk his life by visiting his family. But Shin Bet obviously got a lead and believed it. The three strange rockets fired on Beersheba provided the pretext for breaking the ceasefire, and so the war started again.

Real aficionados of the art of assassination are not very interested in the political or military consequences of their actions. “Art for art's sake”.

A propos, the last Gaza war, two years ago, started the same way. The Israeli army assassinated the de-facto al-Qassam leader, Ahmed Jaabari. The ensuing war with its many hundreds of dead was just collateral damage.

Jaabari was at the time filling in for Deif, who was convalescing in Cairo.

ALL THIS is, of course, much too complicated for American and European diplomats. They like simple stories.

The White House immediately reacted to the resumption of hostilities by condemning the Hamas launching of rockets and reaffirming that “*Israel has a right to defend itself*”. The Western media parroted this line.

For Netanyahu, whether he knew in advance of the assassination attempt or not, it was a way out of a dilemma. He was in the unfortunate position of many leaders in history who start a war and do not know how to get out of it.

In a war, a leader makes grandiloquent speeches, promises victory and bountiful achievements. These promises seldom come true. (If they do, like in Versailles 1919, that may be even worse.)

Netanyahu is a gifted marketing man, if nothing else. He promised a lot, and the people believed him and gave him a 77% rating. The Egyptian draft proposal for a permanent ceasefire, though markedly pro-Israel, fell far short of a victory for Israel. It only confirmed that the war ended

in a draw. Netanyahu's own cabinet was rebellious, public opinion was souring perceptibly. The resumption of the war got him out of this hole.

But what now?

BOMBING THE Gaza population draws more and more criticism from world public opinion. It also has lost its appeal in Israel. The maxim “*Let's bomb them until they stop hating us*” obviously does not work.

The alternative is to enter the Gaza Strip and occupy it completely, so that even Deif and his men have to come up to the surface to be assassinated. But that is a dangerous proposition.

When I was a soldier in the 1948 war, we were taught never to get into a situation which leaves the enemy no way out. In such a case, he will fight to the end, causing many casualties.

There is no way out of the Gaza Strip. If the Israeli army is sent to conquer the entire Strip, the fighting will be ferocious, causing hundreds of Israeli and thousands of Palestinian dead and injured, and untold destruction. The Prime Minister will be one of the political victims.

Netanyahu is fully aware of that. He doesn't want it. But what else can he do? One can almost pity the man.

He can of course, order the army to occupy only parts of the Strip, a village here, a town there. But that will also spread death and destruction, to no manifest gain. In the end, public discontent will be the same.

Hamas threatened this week to open “*the gates of hell*” for us. This hardly affects the inhabitants of Tel Aviv, but for the villages and towns near Gaza this is really hell. Casualties are few, but fear is devastating. Families with children leave en masse. When calm returns, they try to go home, but then the next rockets drive them away again.

Their plight evokes a very strong emotional response throughout the country. No politician can ignore it. Least of all the Prime Minister. He needs to end the war. He also needs a clear image of victory. But how to achieve this?

The Egyptian dictator tries to help. So does Barack Obama, though he is furious with Netanyahu and hates his guts. So does Mahmoud Abbas, who is afraid of a Hamas victory.

But as of now, the man who has the final decision is the Son of Death, Mohammed Deif, if he is alive and kicking. If not, his successor.

If he is alive, the assassination of his wife and baby son may not have made him gentler and more peaceable.