

Meeting in a Tunnel

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THERE WAS THIS VILLAGE in England which took great pride in its archery. In every yard there stood a large target board showing the skills of its owner. On one of these boards every single arrow had hit a bull's eye.

A curious visitor asked the owner: how is this possible? The reply: *“Simple. First I shoot the arrows, and then I draw the circles around them.”*

In this war, our government does the same. We achieve all our goals – but our goals change all the time. In the end, our victory will be complete.

WHEN THE war started, we just wanted to “destroy the terror infrastructure”. Then, when the rockets reached practically all of Israel (without causing much damage, largely owing to the miraculous anti-missile defense), the war aim was to destroy the rockets. When the army crossed the border into Gaza for this purpose, a huge network of tunnels was discovered. They became the main war aim. The tunnels must be destroyed.

Tunnels have been used in warfare since antiquity. Armies unable to conquer fortified towns tried to dig tunnels under their walls. Prisoners escaped through tunnels. When the British imprisoned the leaders of the Hebrew underground, several of them escaped through a tunnel.

Hamas used tunnels to get under the border walls and fences to attack the Israeli army and settlements on the other side. The existence of these tunnels was known, but their large numbers and effectiveness came as a surprise. Like the Vietnamese fighters in their time, Hamas uses the tunnels for attacks, command posts, operational centers and arsenals. Many of them are interconnected.

For the population on the Israeli side, the tunnels are a source of dread. The idea that at any time the head of a Hamas fighter may pop up in the middle of a kibbutz dining hall is not amusing.

So now the war aim is to discover and destroy as many tunnels as possible. No one dreamed of this aim before it all started.

If political expedience demands it, there may be another war aim tomorrow. It will be accepted in Israel by unanimous acclaim.

THE ISRAELI media are now totally subservient. There is no independent reporting. “Military correspon-

dents” are not allowed into Gaza to see for themselves, they are willingly reduced to parroting army communiqués, presenting them as their personal observations. A huge herd of ex-generals are trotted out to “comment” on the situation, all saying exactly the same, even using the same words. The public swallows all this propaganda as gospel truth.

The small voice of Haaretz, with a few commentators like Gideon Levy and Amira Hass, is drowned in the deafening cacophony.

I escape from this brainwashing by listening to both sides, switching all the time between Israeli TV stations and Aljazeera (in Arabic and in English). What I see is two different wars, happening at the same time on two different planets.

For viewers of the Israeli media, Hamas is the incarnation of evil. We are fighting “terrorists”. We are bombing “terror targets” (like the home of the family of Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh). Hamas fighters never withdraw, they “escape”. Their leaders are not commanding from underground command posts, they are “hiding”. They are storing their arms in mosques, schools and hospitals (as we did during British times). Tunnels are “terror tunnels”. Hamas is cynically using the civilian population as “human shields” (as Winston Churchill used the London population). Gaza schools and hospitals are not hit by Israeli bombs, God forbid, but by Hamas rockets (which mysteriously lose their way) and so on.

Seen through Arab eyes, things look somewhat different. Hamas is a patriotic group, fighting with incredible courage against immense odds. They are not a foreign force oblivious to the suffering of the population, they are the sons of this very population, members of the families that are now being killed en masse, who grew up in the houses that are now being destroyed. It is their mothers and siblings who huddle now in UN shelters, without water and electricity, deprived of everything but the clothes on their back.

I have never seen the logic in demonizing the enemy. When I was a soldier in the 1948 war, we had heated arguments with our comrades on other fronts. Each insisted that his particular enemy—Egyptian, Jordanian, Syrian—was the most brave and efficient one. There is no glory in

fighting a depraved gang of “vile terrorists”.

Let's admit that our present enemy is fighting with great courage and inventiveness. That almost miraculously, their civilian and military command structure is still functioning well. That the civilian population is supporting them in spite of immense suffering. That after almost four weeks of fighting against one of the strongest armies in the world, they are still standing upright.

Admitting this may help us to understand the other side, something that is essential both for waging war and making peace, or even a ceasefire.

WITHOUT UNDERSTANDING the enemy or having a clear concept of what we really want, even achieving a ceasefire is an arduous task.

For example: what do we want from Mahmoud Abbas?

For many years the Israeli leadership has openly disparaged him. Ariel Sharon famously called him a “plucked chicken”. Israeli rightists believe that he is “more dangerous than Hamas”, since the naïve Americans are more likely to listen to him. Binyamin Netanyahu did everything possible to destroy his standing and sabotaged all peace negotiations with him. They vilified him for seeking reconciliation with Hamas. As Netanyahu put it, with his usual talent for sound bites, “*peace with us or peace with Hamas.*”

But this week, our leaders were feverishly reaching out to Abbas, crowning him as the only real leader of the Palestinian people, demanding that he play a leading role in the ceasefire negotiations. All Israeli commentators declared that one of the great achievements of the war was the creation of a political bloc consisting of Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf Emirates and Abbas. Yesterday's “no-partner” is now a staunch ally.

The trouble is that many Palestinians now despise Abbas, while looking with admiration upon Hamas, the shining symbol of Arab honor. In Arab culture, honor plays a far larger role than in Europe.

At the moment, Israeli security experts look with growing concern at the situation in the West Bank. The young—and not only the young—seem ready for a third intifada. Already, the army fires live ammunition at protesters in Qalandia, Jerusalem, Bethlehem and other places. The number of dead and injured in the West Bank is rising. For our generals, this is another reason for an early ceasefire in Gaza.

CEASEFIRES ARE made between the people who are firing. Viz: Israel and Hamas. Alas, there is no way around it.

What does Hamas want? Unlike our side, Hamas has not changed its aim: to lift the blockade on the Gaza Strip.

This can mean many things. The maximum: open-

ing the crossings from Israel, repairing and reopening the destroyed airport of Dahaniyah in the south of the Strip, building a seaport at Gaza City (instead of the existing small fishing jetty), allowing Gaza fishermen to go further from the coast.¹

The minimum would be to open the Israeli crossings for the free movement of goods in and out, allowing Gazans to go to the West Bank and beyond, and to support themselves with exports, an aspect which is too rarely mentioned.

In return, Israel would certainly demand international inspection to prevent the building of new tunnels and the restocking of the arsenal of rockets.

Israel would also demand some role for Abbas and his security forces, which are viewed by Hamas (and not only by them) as Israeli collaborators.

The Israeli army also demands that even after a ceasefire comes into force, it will complete the destruction of all the known tunnels before withdrawing.

(Hamas also demands the opening of the crossing into Egypt—but that is not a part of the negotiations with Israel.)

IF THERE had been direct negotiations, this would have been comparatively easy. But with so many mediators vying with each other, it's difficult.

Last Wednesday, Haaretz disclosed an amazing piece of news: the Israeli Foreign Ministry—yes, the fief of Avigdor Lieberman!—proposes turning the problem over to the United Nations. Let them propose the conditions for the cease fire.

The UN? The institution almost universally despised in Israel? Well, as the Yiddish saying goes, “*when God wills, even a broomstick can shoot.*”

Assuming that a ceasefire is achieved (and not just a short humanitarian one, that no side intends to keep), what then?

Will serious peace negotiations become possible? Will Abbas join as the representative of all Palestinians, including Hamas? Will this war be the last one, or remain just another episode in an endless chain of wars?

I HAVE a crazy fantasy.

Peace will come and filmmakers will produce movies about this war, too.

One scene: Israeli soldiers discover a tunnel and enter it in order to clear it of enemies. At the same time, Hamas fighters enter the tunnel at the other end, on their way to attack a kibbutz.

The fighters meet in the middle, beneath the fence. They see each other in the dim light. And then, instead of shooting, they shake hands.

A mad idea? Indeed. Sorry.

¹After Oslo, Shimon Peres fantasized about a big harbor in Gaza, serving the entire Middle East and turning Gaza into a second Singapore.