

{MAY 22 2004}

THE RAPE OF RAFAH

The immense might of the Israeli army, assembled from all over the country, has attacked a small Palestinian township on the margin of the destitute Gaza Strip. Palestinians, both fighters and civilians, are being killed by the dozen, homes are being destroyed wholesale, the sight of the fleeing population bring back memories of 1948.

All this – for what?

At first sight, the whole action is absurd. Ariel Sharon has proposed a unilateral withdrawal from all of the Gaza Strip, and his original plan included the evacuation of the “Philadelphi Axis”, a narrow buffer zone cutting Gaza off from Egypt. This means that he does not consider this entire territory necessary for the security of Israel. According to him, the Gaza Strip is a military and demographic burden, and the quicker we get out of it, the better.

Sha’ul Mofaz, a former Chief of Staff and the present Minister of Defense, went even further. This eminent thinker revealed that Gaza is not a part of “our patrimony”, that the settlements there were a mistake from the start. This means that the soldiers who were killed there under his command died for nothing, for a mistake, and every soldier killed there now is dying in vain.

But now more soldiers are being placed in mortal danger. Dozens of Palestinians, among them women and children, are being killed for the mistake.

Does this sound crazy? What evil spirit possessed the Prime Minister and the Chief of Staff to start a big military operation in a territory that the army is supposed to leave at any moment?

There must be some method in this madness. What is the real reason for this onslaught?

The official purpose is to “destroy the tunnels” under the “Philadelphi Axis”. But tunnels have been there for years. The army boasts of destroying 98 such tunnels in the past, but only one single tunnel has been discovered in this operation. It is clear that no military action will put an end to them. Even if the army destroys more and more Palestinian homes in order to widen the axis – the new tunnels will just be longer.

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The tunnels are a pretext. So, what were the real reasons for this brutal invasion of a pitiful little town?

The first reason is the simplest: thirst for revenge. The army has suffered two painful blows, its commanders want to settle the account. Dozens of Palestinians are killed for 13 of our soldiers, hundreds of homes demolished for two destroyed personnel carriers.

Add to this the argument of morale. Some senior officers were open about this: an impressive operation that underlines the superiority of the Israeli army in order to raise the morale of the soldiers who are still smarting after the failures.

One can also mention the guilty conscience of the commanders who sent their soldiers into the killing field riding on huge quantities of explosives in inadequately armored personnel carriers. In a decent army the responsible officers – headed by the hapless Chief of Staff – would have resigned within hours. But in the Israeli army that is not the way things are. On the contrary, if you fail, you can expect promotion.

From a purely military point of view, the “Philadelphi Axis” (the name randomly generated by computer) is madness. It cannot be defended without committing atrocities constituting or bordering on war crimes. It attracts guerilla fighters as a candle attracts moths. But the army chiefs who devised it will never admit its folly.

There is another reason for this operation. The generals want to leave Gaza “with their heads held high”. They cannot allow the Palestinian guerillas to claim to have driven them out by force, as Hizbullah did in Lebanon.

A childish argument, reflecting a particular military mentality. After Rafah, the very opposite will happen: the action will confirm to the Palestinians that their heroic stand has forced the army out. Who will be able to deny that?

But the directive for the onslaught on Rafah came from the political leadership, which was in need of a resounding military show, with much killing and destroying, in order to gratify the primitive emotions of a part of the public. Simply put: they hurt us, so we hurt them tenfold. Ten eyes for an eye, ten teeth for a tooth. That’s how votes are won.

Ariel Sharon also has a very good personal reason for ordering such a glorious military campaign in the alleys of Rafah: after his defeat in the Likud members’ referendum, he was stuck in a dead end. Opponents in his party and his government blocked him in all directions.

A few days after the Likud vote, Gush Shalom published a political ad under the headline “Warning!” It read:

“Sharon now resembles a wounded bull.

“A wounded bull is a dangerous animal.

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“His plan is dead. He is incapable of dismantling even one single settlement. He is incapable of getting another plan accepted.

“His only way out is to order a spectacular military adventure.

“There is no limit to the bloody deeds he is capable of now in order to survive.”

This warning was published in Haaretz on May 7. Less than two weeks later, the operation started.

Besides the generals' thirst for revenge, the action is designed to serve the personal interests of Sharon. The dramatic events in Rafah fill all the news bulletins and leave no room for Sharon's political failure. This restores his image as a resolute leader. Again he is a player on the global stage. And if the entire world condemns him, this only serves to raise his stature among his voters.

And the opposition? A week ago, 150 thousand peaceniks demonstrated in Tel-Aviv's Rabin Square to express their disgust with the present situation and to demand change. Some politicians appointed themselves as the leaders of these wonderful people and showered them with garbled and contradictory messages. Yet none of these speakers cried out this week against the atrocity in Rafah. The radical peace movements were again left alone in the field. A few hours after the killing of the unarmed demonstrators in Rafah, these peace activists were facing the police in the streets of Tel-Aviv, and yesterday they held a tumultuous demonstration at the roadblock near Rafah.

The invasion of Rafah will, of course, fail, as did the invasion of Jenin. A regular army, strong as it may be, cannot put down guerilla fighters who are supported by a desperate population. On the contrary, the mightier an army is, the smaller are its chances of succeeding. It can kill dozens and hundreds, destroy whole neighborhoods, drive masses of people from their homes and cause a small Nakba – nothing will help. A guerilla war can only be ended by compromise and a peaceful solution.

A little reminder: the word “guerilla” (little war) was coined in Spain during the struggle against Napoleon. The French reacted with the utmost brutality, witnessed for eternity by Goya's shocking painting. It did not help them. Many historians believe that the Spanish guerilla stuck a mortal blow to Napoleon's world empire, even before his disastrous invasion of Russia.

Sharon is no Napoleon, whatever he might believe. He will leave Rafah as he entered it. Nothing will change. Except one thing: Rafah, like Jenin, will take its place in the national epic that will sustain generation of Palestinians to come.