

{JUNE 3 2006}

MEETING HAMAS

Sheikh Muhammad Hassan Abu-Tir has something every politician craves: instant recognizability. His long beard dyed bright orange with henna is very conspicuous indeed. Actually it is a religious symbol: the prophet, for whom he is named, used to dye his beard the same way.

The red-bearded Sheikh is better known in Israel than any other senior Hamas leader. In the most popular satirical show on Israeli TV, “A Wonderful Land”, he is already impersonated by a famous humorist, who succeeds in imitating his style and body language, with his intelligent smile, and brought him into our living rooms. For many Israelis, this impersonation has almost turned him into a likable figure, even if he himself does not like it at all. (Something similar has happened to Yasser Arafat, too. A marionette representing him in a very popular TV show portrayed him as a likable, mildly humorous figure, very different from the demonic image that the official Israeli propaganda endeavored to establish.)

This week, Abu-Tir was in the news for a much more serious reason. When I met him at his home, an ominous threat was hovering over him: expulsion. The Interior Minister in the Olmert government informed him and three of his colleagues, all Hamas members of the Palestinian parliament, that within one month they would have to choose: either to resign from all their positions in the Palestinian Authority or be deprived of their status as “permanent residents” in Jerusalem. That would lead to their expulsion to the occupied West Bank.

How was that possible?

After the 1967 “Six-day War”, when the Israeli government was in a hurry to annex East Jerusalem, it drew up new borders for the city, well beyond the neighborhoods of the city itself. The intention was to annex a maximum of land with a minimum of Palestinian inhabitants. Because of this, a map of the city looks like a pre-historic monster, or an American “gerrymander”.

Yet, in spite of all the efforts and tricks, there was no way to avoid including a sizable Palestinian population in the “unified” city, amounting now to a quarter of a million

human beings. The village of Sur-Baher, where Abu-Tir is living, is situated a short distance from the city, but was annexed along with the rest.

When the annexation took place, there arose, of course, the question of the fate of these inhabitants. If it had been possible to drive them out, it would surely have been done, but under the circumstances that would not have been acceptable. The natural thing would have been to give them Israeli citizenship, as was done in 1949 when a number of Arab villages, which were not conquered by the Israeli army, were turned over to Israel by King Abdallah of Jordan in the armistice agreement.

But the Israeli leaders were appalled by the idea of adding another large bloc of Palestinians to the already considerable number of Arabs in Israel, amounting to about 20% of Israeli citizens. They found a tricky way out: the Palestinians in East Jerusalem were given the status of “permanent residents” in Israel, but remained citizens of Jordan. That way they could not take part in Israeli elections, but enjoyed many other privileges (like paying Israeli taxes and social security contributions.)

The government knew, of course, that the Arabs would find it difficult to object to this ploy. If they had demanded Israeli citizenship, that would have meant recognizing Israeli sovereignty over East Jerusalem – something no state in the world has yet done.

Not giving citizenship to the “annexed” Arabs also served another purpose. In the course of the 1948 war, the whole population of West Jerusalem had to flee to the East of the city. They left behind them all their property, including all the beautiful homes of the Talbiyeh quarter and the land on which the Knesset, the Prime Minister’s office, the Giv’at Ram campus of the Hebrew University and the Israel Museum now stand. If the owners of these properties, who now live in East Jerusalem, had been granted citizenship, they could have demanded them back. That would not have been an automatic process, but the pressure on the government would have been intense. It was safer to make them “permanent residents” only.

One of the differences between a “citizen” and a “permanent resident” is that it is almost impossible to revoke citizenship, but quite easy to annul the status of a “permanent resident”. The Minister of the Interior is empowered to do this by a simple executive decision. The victim can, of course, appeal to the Supreme Court, but the chances of success are slim.

The action of Interior Minister Ronnie Bar-On is a bad omen. If he succeeds, this will constitute a danger to all the 250 thousand Palestinians in East Jerusalem. Their status as permanent residents could be revoked, under some security pretext or other. In Israel, security can be used to justify almost everything. Innocent Israelis can always be convinced that some measure is necessary in order to protect their lives from the murderous terrorists.

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The abuse of the term “permanent resident” is obvious. A “permanent resident” is usually an immigrant who comes to Israel and is not able – or does not want – to become a citizen. To apply this term to families who have lived in Jerusalem since it was conquered by the Caliph Omar some 1300 years ago is a political and linguistic rape.

It violates international law, which says that East Jerusalem is an occupied territory whose inhabitants are “protected persons” who cannot be expelled from their homes. It also violates the Oslo agreement, which says that the question of Jerusalem is to be decided upon in the final status negotiations, which have not even started. Oslo specifically grants the Palestinian residents of Jerusalem the right to vote for and be elected to the Palestinian parliament. Abu-Tir has been elected by the voters of the city as their deputy.

The demand that he choose between resignation from parliament and expulsion from the city is a crass violation of a written agreement – by the same Israeli government that demands that Hamas accept all written agreements with Israel. There seems to be no limit to the cynicism of Olmert & Co.

Moreover, when the Oslo agreement was signed, Shimon Peres also gave a written commitment on behalf of the Government of Israel that no Palestinian institution in Jerusalem would be harmed. When Ehud Olmert was still the mayor of Jerusalem, he violated this commitment by closing the “Orient House”. Now he is violating it again.

Perhaps it is worthwhile to compare the two protagonists of this affair: Ronnie Bar-On and Muhammad Abu-Tir.

Bar-On was born in Tel-Aviv, two months after the official founding of the State of Israel. I am not sure whether his family came to Palestine one or two generations earlier. He was always a very right-wing person, a Herut-Likud-man from youth. He is known for his rudeness. In the Knesset and in his frequent appearances on TV talk-shows he often behaves like a real oral hooligan.

He became famous mainly because of the scandal that bears his name. When the position of Attorney General, a very powerful office in Israel, became vacant, Binyamin Netanyahu appointed Bar-On. At once rumors started, alleging that this had been done in collusion with Shas leader Aryeh Deri, who was awaiting trial and was eventually sent to prison. A public storm broke out, and Netanyahu was forced to remove him after only a few days in office.

As a politician, Bar-On is a complete opportunist. His right-wing views did not prevent him from jumping on the bandwagon when Sharon set up Kadima. Because of this jump, he is now Interior Minister. He never made any sacrifice for his views.

Abu-Tir was born in 1951, the son of a family that is deeply rooted in the country. He

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was sentenced to prison for life and spent (with interruptions) 25 years – almost half his life – in prison. First he was a Fatah member, but in prison he became a pious Muslim and joined Hamas.

He is admired by the people around him, an amiable person with a lively sense of humor. It's easy to talk with him and he speaks perfect Hebrew. He has a lot of influence in his party.

I met him first during the stormy demonstration in a-Ram, under a shower of tear gas. We agreed then that we should meet in quieter surroundings. A few days ago I visited him at his home. We exchanged views and agreed to make the fact of our meeting public, thus turning it into a political act. I asked him to find out whether conditions are ripe for a wider meeting of Israeli peace organizations and the Hamas leadership.

To me, the meeting brought back old memories. 32 years ago I established the first contacts with the emissaries of Yasser Arafat, who was then considered an arch-terrorist, the leader of a terrorist organization whose charter called for the elimination of the State of Israel. These contacts led in 1982 to my meeting with Arafat in besieged Beirut. It was his first meeting with an Israeli, but the circle widened rapidly and prepared the ground on both sides for the Oslo agreement and the Two-State Solution.

I believe that now it is the job of the Israeli peace movements to do the same again: build the first bridge between Israelis and Hamas and pave the way for a dialogue between the Government of Israel and the Government of Palestine. (By the way, consistency demands that those who insist on talking about the “Hamas government” should also use the term “Kadima government”.)

In such a process, which demands a change in the minds of millions on both sides, the first contacts are very important. The establishment and its numerous servants in the media naturally try to ignore and conceal them, the public treats them with hostility and a lack of understanding, until it gets used to the idea. But it is an essential task.

More than half the population in the Palestinian territories voted for Hamas. Hamas is an existing fact. It will play a major role in any conceivable scenario. The majority of Israelis long for an end to the conflict, and so do the majority of Palestinians. Both governments must, in the end, accept this reality.

Our task is to help them cross this bridge.