

{JULY 1 2006}

# AGATHA IN THE RAIN

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“Israel has declared war on the Palestinian people! The Palestinian people will answer in kind! The Palestinian rebellion will go on! The Palestinian fighters are steadfast in the service of the nation! Down with the Nazi-Zionist occupation! Out with the unclean infidels from the Holy Land ! Destroyed Rafah – we shall build you anew! Long live the Palestinian revolution! Long live the State of Palestine!”

A Hamas leaflet of last week? Not exactly. With appropriate changes, this leaflet was published on July 2, 1946 – 60 years ago almost to the day – by the Haganah, after “Black Saturday.”

Then, in the wake of a daring commando action by the Palmakh (“shock troops” of the Haganah), which blew up a number of bridges, the British government of Palestine decided to carry out a plan prepared well in advance. It was code-named “Agatha.” On June 29, 1946, 17,000 British soldiers fanned out all over the Jewish towns and kibbutzim to confiscate arms and documents and arrest the leaders of the Jewish community. The British government affirmed its determination to stamp out terrorism. In Jerusalem, the soldiers occupied the headquarters of the Jewish Agency, the de facto government of the Jewish “state within the state”, and confiscated many documents that clearly established its close connections with the “terrorist headquarters” – the joint command of the Haganah, the Irgun and the Stern Group, which worked closely together at the time.

The soldiers broke into the homes of the political leaders of the Jewish community and arrested most of the Jewish Agency “ministers.” The leaders were detained in Latrun. But the commanders of the underground organizations decided to continue fighting, in order to prove to the British that the arrest of the leaders had not silenced them.

“Black Saturday” was a milestone in the fight against the British. Within a year, they decided to leave the country.

The similarity between the British “Agatha” and the Israeli “Summer Rains” is striking. This shows that every occupation regime is condemned to repeat the actions of its predecessors, even when they have been proved hopeless. This does not mean

that all occupiers are fools – only that the logic of occupation itself condemns them to do foolish things.

The aim of the present operation is, ostensibly, to free the soldier Gilad Shalit, who was captured by the Palestinian underground (consisting of several organizations), in an attack that even an Israeli military expert called “a daring commando action.”

If our army had kept its high military standard, it would immediately have replaced all the commanders responsible for the debacle. Fifty years ago this would have been done. But we have a different army now. Nobody was removed. The failed commanders just called the attack “a terrorist act,” the fighters “terrorists” and the captured soldier “kidnapped.”

The action proves, of course, an old military maxim: for every means of defense a means of attack can be found, and vice versa. The “security” fence that surrounds the Gaza Strip on all sides (except the sea), the like of which is now being built inside the West Bank, can stop thieves and people looking for work in Israel, but not determined fighters who will always find ways to cross it, whether from below or above.

The “kidnapped” soldier served as a pretext for an operation which must have been prepared a long time ago. The Israeli and international public has been told that the aim is to set him free, but in practice it has put his life in greater jeopardy. If the soldiers come near to where he is hidden, he could be killed in the cross-fire – as happened some years ago to the soldier Nakhshon Waksman, who was captured by Hamas. He was killed in the exchange of fire between the soldiers and the Palestinians. Waksman would probably be alive today, if there had been an exchange of prisoners instead.

The connection between the “kidnapped soldier” and the operation exists only in the realm of propaganda. The same goes for the second pretext: that the aim is to put an end to the launching of Qassam rockets at the town of Sderot.

True, this is indeed an intolerable situation. The Qassam, a simple and inexpensive weapon, causes more panic than real damage, like the German V-rockets fired on London in World War II. It terrorizes the population, and that is its aim. Its purpose is to break the devastating blockade that the Israeli government has been maintaining against the Gaza strip since the “disengagement.” Until now, the army has not come up with a means to put a stop to the rockets.

But the Qassams, too, are not the real cause of the “Summer Rains” operation. Its character shows that it has a much wider aim: to destroy the elected Palestinian government (Israeli propaganda's “Hamas Government”) and bring the Palestinian population to its knees. This is supposed to make it possible for the Israeli government to carry out the “Convergence” plan, annexing major parts of the West Bank to Israel and preventing the establishment of a viable Palestinian state.

A clear aim, which the operation is designed to attain by simple means: breaking the Palestinian population by the liquidation of its leadership, destruction of its infrastructure and cutting off of food supplies, medicines, electricity, water and sanitary services – not to mention employment. The message to the Palestinians: if you want to put an end to your suffering, remove the government you have elected.

Can this succeed? Exactly like the the success of the British operation. “Agatha” achieved the very opposite.

Like all the failures of our army over the years, from the battle of Karameh in 1968, through the Egyptian crossing of the canal at the beginning of the Yom Kippur war, to the two intifadas, the reason lies with the abysmal contempt that the army commanders hold for the Arabs in general and the Palestinians in particular. The Shin Bet meets the Palestinians in the form of interrogated prisoners, who are ready to say anything at all under torture, and the despicable collaborators, who are ready to sell their cousins for drugs or money. The occupation commanders cannot imagine that the Palestinians could react like any other people, even – God forbid! – as we did in a similar situation. What, these pitiful Arabs are like us?

True, the British never behaved towards us as we do now towards the Palestinians. But on the other hand, the Palestinians' ability to suffer oppression is much greater than ours. It is based on the family structure that makes for much more effective mutual help, and on the experience of living for years in dire straits.

On “Black Saturday” the Jewish community stood together behind its besieged leadership. The opposition from right and left rallied behind Ben-Gurion (who was abroad) and Sharett (imprisoned in Latrun). Experience shows that every people behaves like this when a foreign enemy attacks its leadership. Hamas is almost certain to emerge much strengthened from this test. The arrests prove to the Palestinian public that its is a fighting, loyal leadership, not corrupted by the amenities of power--contrary to their predecessors, some of whom were tainted by corruption.

The pretext for the operation – the release of the captured soldier – will only harden the attitude of the Palestinians. No issue is more important for them than the release of Palestinian prisoners – a matter that directly concerns 10,000 Palestinian extended families, in every town, quarter and village. These families are prepared to suffer anything to secure their release.

The second victim of the operation is the “Convergence Plan,” which has become ridiculous. In the eyes of the ordinary Israeli, it looks like this: We have left Gaza’ and now we are returning. We dismantled the settlements there, and got the Qassams on Sderot in return. Sharon has failed, so Olmert will fail doubly.

That is true, but not for the obvious reasons. The withdrawal from Gaza has not

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brought security, because it was carried out without any dialogue or agreement with the Palestinians. It has not brought peace nearer, because it was coupled with an open intention to annex large parts of the West Bank. And, no less importantly, we did indeed leave the Gaza Strip entirely, but have blockaded it and cut it off from the world. All this is even more true for the “convergence” of Olmert.

The “Summer Rains” may have washed it off the map.