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In NY synagogue, Israeli settler leader calls for assassination of Abbas-- and tax-deductible contributions

Article Author(s): Philip Weiss

Media Outlet: Mondoweiss

Date: March 19, 2009

Source Link(s): <http://www.philipweiss.org/mondoweiss/2009/03/in-ny-synagogue-settler-leader-cal...> [1]

Exclusive report from Mondoweiss: In a speech at a New York synagogue Wednesday night, Nadia Matar, a leader of the Israeli settlers' group "Women in Green," called for the assassination of Mahmoud Abbas, the president of the Palestinian Authority, as a way of bringing peace to Israel.

Just as Churchill understood that in order to bring peace to Europe, "he had to destroy the Nazi beast," Matar explained, "today we must destroy all the terrorist organizations. We must kill all the terrorist leaders, starting with Mahmoud Abbas and all others...Nobody had any moral qualms at destroying the Nazi regime. We have to abolish the Oslo Agreements, there's no difference between the PA, the Islamic Jihad, the Hamas, whatever names you have, they're all terrorists and we cannot have peace with them."

Matar then urged the crowd at the Safra Synagogue on the Upper East Side to make tax-deductible donations to Women in Green by writing checks to the Central Fund of Israel.

As our site has reported, the Central Fund is a U.S. charity group that supports Jewish settler militias. It has received donations from leading figures in the American Jewish community, including James Tisch, the ceo of Loews, Michael Milken the banker/philanthropist, Alan C. (Ace) Greenberg, the former ceo of Bear Stearns, and actor Kirk Douglas. The Fund is housed at a fabric store on Sixth Avenue called Marcus

Fabrics and administered by Arthur and Hadassah Marcus, who live in New York, and their son Jay, who lives in Efrat, the West Bank settlement where Nadia Matar also lives.

Matar, who was born in Belgium and moved to Israel 20 years ago, thanked the Safra Synagogue rabbi, Elie Abadie, who is associated with Yeshiva University, for hosting her visit. It was her third appearance in a tour of the U.S. to build support for the Jewish colonists of the West Bank.

An Israeli foreign minister who won't wear velvet gloves

Article Author(s): Alan Philps

Media Outlet: The National

Date: March 20, 2009

Source Link(s): <http://www.thenational.ae/article/20090320/OPINION/551935184/1080> ^[2]

Next week marks the 30th anniversary of the peace treaty between Israel and Egypt. For a generation this document has guaranteed that Israel will not come under attack from Arab armies. So it is surprising that the next foreign minister of Israel – barring some upset in the still incomplete coalition negotiations – will be Avigdor Lieberman, the man who used the podium of the Israeli parliament last year to tell President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt to “go to Hell”.

Lieberman has plenty of form in beer hall politics: he once called for the bombing of the Aswan dam, and has offered to provide buses to take Hamas prisoners to the sea and drown them. His party, a lobby for Russian-speaking immigrants, came third in the elections thanks to a platform calling for Palestinian citizens of Israel to take an oath of loyalty or be stripped of their citizenship. Not surprisingly, there is little appetite in Cairo for celebrating this anniversary.

In the past, foreign ministers were employed to disguise Israel's iron fist with fine words tailored to selected foreign audiences. Lieberman will be showing a new face of Israel to the world – a populist with overtly racist views and a thuggish demeanour. Some supporters of Israel are in despair. Following the Gaza invasion, Israel is losing the support of Turkey, a key regional ally, and in parts of Europe it is increasingly seen as apartheid-era South Africa on the Mediterranean. The Israeli foreign ministry might as well scrap its multimillion dollar cultural diplomacy initiative.

But Lieberman is not a passing phenomenon. He represents the integration into Israeli politics of the million immigrants from the former Soviet Union. These new immigrants have displaced the old Labour party, once the elite of the country and the so-called party of peace. In every Labour voter there was a sepia-tinted memory of a kibbutznik taking his horse to be shod in an Arab village. If this fantasy of Jewish-Arab co-operation was ever true, it stopped being so in the 1920s. But the Labour party has always felt that somehow the Arabs can be forced to love, or just get along with, Zionism – a viewpoint which used to sell easily in Europe and the US, even if it never corresponded with facts on the ground.

The Russian-speaking immigrants have no truck with such illusions. They came in waves in the 1970s, believing they were coming to a “civilised, European” country. They found that one fifth of the population of Israel was of Arab origin. And worse, they found that they were looked down on as accidental immigrants, who came to Israel only because they could not get to America. “Russian” became a term of abuse, for someone whose goal was to dump granny on the Israeli welfare state and head off to New York.

With Lieberman the immigrants have got their revenge. The Labour elite is crushed. Lieberman's discourse derives not from the early years of Zionism but from the Leninist thinking of the old USSR, where any negotiation was a zero-sum game, with one clear winner and one outright loser. For Lieberman, it is not enough that Egypt has a peace treaty with Israel; the head of state must come and pay regular visits to the Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem. It is not enough that the vast majority of Israeli Arabs live peaceful and productive lives despite widespread discrimination; they must sign up to the ideals of the Zionist state or lose their citizenship.

Lieberman alone is not going to destroy hopes for peace, as lazy headlines might suggest. Benjamin Netanyahu, the prime minister-designate, opposes a Palestinian state. With or without Lieberman, Israeli policy would be to nurture the Hamas-Fatah split among the Palestinians, which rules out any serious negotiation; the Obama administration's zeal for knocking Israeli and Palestinian heads together will no doubt flag as the new president is ground down by his battles with Wall Street and the shooting war in Afghanistan.

The dangers are longer-term. Israel is choosing a man who has acquired the image of a mini-Milosevic, determined to create a Jewish state by dint of hiving off Arab-inhabited parts of Israel to the Palestinian territories, and threatening to deprive the remainder of their civil rights.

No doubt as foreign minister he will moderate his tone, having successfully raised his profile during the election campaign as a straight talker who says what other politicians do not dare to utter. But whatever image massaging takes place, there is no disguising the fact that a watershed has been crossed. The issue of the Israeli Arabs is crucial for the Jewish state. So long as they were full citizens, they were evidence that Arab and Zionist could coexist and that Israel, for all its discrimination, held to some basic tenets of democracy. In fact, successive Israeli governments destroyed this precious charge, by discriminating in land, housing and jobs. The sepia-tinted dream of the kibbutz and the Arab farmer has been dying for years, and Lieberman administered the coup de grace.

We are now in the land of zero-sum: Lieberman ? and a good proportion of the Israeli electorate ? will not tolerate the presence of Israeli Arabs as a badge of Israel's democratic credentials. In his view, they must be with Israel or against it. With the future of the Israeli Arabs now in question, the cloak of democracy is falling away.

Soldiers? Accounts of Gaza Killings Raise Furor in Israel

Article Author(s): Ethan Bronner

Media Outlet: The New York Times

Date: March 20, 2009

Source Link(s): <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/20/world/middleeast/20gaza.html> ^[3]

JERUSALEM ? In the two months since Israel ended its military assault on Gaza, Palestinians and international rights groups have accused it of excessive force and wanton killing in that operation, but the Israeli military has said it followed high ethical standards and took great care to avoid civilian casualties.

Now testimony is emerging from within the ranks of soldiers and officers alleging a permissive attitude toward the killing of civilians and reckless destruction of property that is sure to inflame the domestic and international debate about the army's conduct in Gaza. On Thursday, the military's chief advocate

general ordered an investigation into a soldier's account of a sniper killing a woman and her two children who walked too close to a designated no-go area by mistake, and another account of a sharpshooter who killed an elderly woman who came within 100 yards of a commandeered house.

When asked why that elderly woman was killed, a squad commander was quoted as saying: "What's great about Gaza? you see a person on a path, he doesn't have to be armed, you can simply shoot him. In our case it was an old woman on whom I did not see any weapon when I looked. The order was to take down the person, this woman, the minute you see her. There are always warnings, there is always the saying, "Maybe he's a terrorist." What I felt was, there was a lot of thirst for blood."

The testimonies by soldiers, leaked to the newspapers Maariv and Haaretz, appeared in a journal published by a military preparatory course at the Oranim Academic College in the northern town of Tivon. The newspapers promised to release more such anecdotal accounts on Friday, without saying how many.

The academy's director, Dany Zamir, told Israel Radio, "Those were very harsh testimonies about unjustified shooting of civilians and destruction of property that conveyed an atmosphere in which one feels entitled to use unrestricted force against Palestinians."

The revelations caused an immediate uproar here, with some soldiers and reservists saying they did not recognize the stories being told as accurate.

Defense Minister Ehud Barak told Israel Radio that he believed such incidents to be exceptions, adding, "The Israeli Army is the most moral in the world, and I know what I'm talking about because I know what took place in the former Yugoslavia, in Iraq."

It was clear that Mr. Zamir felt that his concerns, which he had raised earlier in a letter to the military chief of staff, Lt. Gen. Gabi Ashkenazi, had not been taken seriously and that was why he published the testimonies.

Since the war ended, others have raised similar questions, generating a heated debate within military circles.

"According to the code, a soldier has to do his utmost to avoid civilian casualties and that involves taking some risk," said Moshe Halbertal, a Jewish philosophy professor at Hebrew University who, along with three others, rewrote the military ethics code eight years ago. "That is the question we have to struggle with. From the testimonies of these soldiers, it sounds like they didn't practice this norm."

Amir Marmor, a 33-year-old history graduate student in Jerusalem and a military reservist, said in an interview with The New York Times that he was stunned to discover the way civilian casualties were discussed in training discussions before his tank unit entered Gaza in January. "Shoot and don't worry about the consequences," was the message from the top commanders, he said. Speaking of a lieutenant colonel who briefed the troops, Mr. Marmor said, "His whole demeanor was extremely gung ho. This is very, very different from my usual experience. I have been doing reserve duty for 12 years, and it was always an issue how to avoid causing civilian injuries. He said in this operation we are not taking any chances. Morality aside, we have to do our job. We will cry about it later."

Some 1,300 people were killed in the Gaza war, but how many of them were combatants remains a matter of controversy. Israel lost about 10 soldiers in Gaza, some because of fire by its own forces.

The Gaza-based Palestinian Center for Human Rights, which has documented the Gaza deaths, says that about two-thirds of the 1,300 were civilians, among them 121 women and 288 children, which it defines as

anyone 18 and younger.

But the Institute for Counter-Terrorism in Israel said Thursday that it had analyzed the Palestinian center's names and found that some that it listed as civilians were identified as combatants on Hamas-related Web sites. Some listed as children were 17-year-olds with guns, it said, adding that more than 500 of those described by the center as civilians it considered "unknowns" because most were men of combat age whose activities could not be easily traced.

It argued that the proportion of women and children among the dead was relatively low, showing that Israel had not killed in an indiscriminate fashion.

Gur Rosenblat, a company commander during the Gaza operation, said in an interview: "To say that people were killed without justification" the opposite was true. We put soldiers at risk to prevent harming their civilians."

Israeli experts noted that Palestinian women had served as suicide bombers in the past so that soldiers in Gaza did not always know when a woman was approaching whether she was a threat.

One of the soldiers' testimonies involved the killing of a family. The soldier said: "We had taken over the house, and the family was released and told to go right. A mother and two children got confused and went left. The sniper on the roof wasn't told that this was O.K. and that he shouldn't shoot. You can say he just did what he was told."

Much of what happened in Gaza, some military experts said, was in reaction to the way events unfolded in the second Lebanon war in 2006 when Hezbollah caused many Israeli casualties.

In that war, when Israeli soldiers took over a house, they sometimes found themselves shot at from a house next door. The result was that in Gaza, many houses next to those commandeered by troops were destroyed to avoid that risk.

Still, Israeli ethicists say they are troubled by what they have heard.

"Unfortunately, I think that selective use of killing civilians has been very much on the agenda for fighting terror," said Yaron Ezrahi, a political scientist at Hebrew University who has been lecturing at defense colleges. "The army believes that a weak spot of Israeli deterrence is its strong commitment not to kill civilians, and there has grown the sense that it might have to temporarily overcome that weakness in order to restore deterrence."

Israeli Coalition Appears Fated to Clash With U.S.

Article Author(s): Howard Schneider

Media Outlet: The Washington Post

Date: March 20, 2009

Source Link(s): <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/03/19/AR2009031903710....>

[4]

JERUSALEM, March 19 -- The foreign minister of Israel's incoming government lives in a West Bank settlement and will begin life as a diplomat battling the perception that he is anti-Arab.

A leading contender to become defense minister once characterized the two-state solution that forms the basis of U.S. and international policy toward Israel and the Palestinians as "a story the Western world tells with Western eyes." And the potential make-or-break votes in the country's new parliamentary coalition belong to legislators from religious parties that would like to expand settlement construction in the occupied West Bank.

Israel's next government seems tailor-made for conflict with an administration in Washington that supports a Palestinian state and is expected to push for progress on drawing its borders. Prime Minister-designate Binyamin Netanyahu is himself a skeptic when it comes to Palestinian statehood and has referred to U.S.-backed peace talks as a waste of time.

While Netanyahu has compromised in past dealings with Washington -- an earlier term as prime minister was cut short after he made land concessions at the urging of President Bill Clinton-- his new coalition partners may not leave him much room to maneuver.

"The more narrow the government the more difficult it will be for Netanyahu to make some gesture towards the U.S.," said Gerald Steinberg, chairman of the political science department at Bar-Ilan University outside Tel Aviv. On issues such as settlements, if pressure comes from Washington, "it is likely to lead to a major confrontation."

Israel and the United States still agree on a broad set of issues -- including some, such as curbing Iran's nuclear plans, that Israel's new government wants at the top of the agenda. But Israeli, Palestinian and U.S. analysts and officials agree that the two governments will likely be at odds on questions of West Bank settlements and movement toward a Palestinian state.

From the Palestinian perspective, a push from Washington is seen as the most likely chance for progress after eight years in which President George W. Bush was widely perceived as unwilling to challenge Israeli positions.

"They cannot avoid the challenge forever," said Qwais Abulaila, a member of the Palestinian Legislative Council. "If the United States wants to keep its credibility, they have to have the courage to confront them."

Already, there has been controversy over a possible Netanyahu national security appointee, Uzi Arad. He has been denied a U.S. visa because of a meeting he had with a Pentagon employee involved in leaking information. Arad, a former Mossad agent, has said he did not receive any classified information and expects the visa problem to be resolved.

The election last month that put Netanyahu's Likud party in position to govern followed a period in which Israelis had soured on prospects for a negotiated peace. Israel dismantled settlements and withdrew from the Gaza Strip in 2005, but the move did not bring the expected quiet. Rockets and mortars fall regularly into Israeli towns. The Islamist group Hamas won the 2006 Palestinian parliamentary elections and, about a year later, forced the rival Fatah faction out of Gaza.

In the context of that history, said Netanyahu senior adviser Ron Dermer, there is far more to discuss than Israeli settlement construction in the West Bank.

"My impression is that the number of people who believe that issue is the difference between peace in the Middle East and war are few and far between, after all that happened in Gaza," Dermer said.

During the U.S. presidential campaign, Barack Obama criticized "aggressive settlement construction," and during a recent visit to Israel, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton said Israeli plans to destroy homes

in East Jerusalem violated agreements the country had made to negotiate the disposition of disputed territory.

"Clearly this kind of activity is unhelpful and not in keeping with the obligations entered into under the 'road map,'" Clinton said, referring to the long-stalled peace plan.

As one of his first acts, President Obama appointed as his Mideast envoy former senator George J. Mitchell of Maine, who in the waning days of the Clinton administration led an international call for a settlement freeze -- including the "natural growth" that many Israelis feel should be allowed in established settlements. That didn't happen: The Israeli population in the West Bank rose from 191,600 at the end of 2000 to 289,600 at the end of 2008, according to Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics, a rate of growth more than double that of the nation as a whole. So far the White House has not released a detailed position on the issue, and it will be one of Obama's more closely watched first steps.

Yossi Klein Halevi, a senior fellow at Israel's Adelson Institute for Strategic Studies, said Israeli public opinion -- and the regional security situation -- is such that Obama may find more room for compromise than expected. Netanyahu, he said, was elected mainly by people worried about Iran and that country's influence over Hamas and Lebanon's Hezbollah, not by those demanding a hard line on settlements.

Some settlement construction will continue and "there's no way to avoid some form of clash," he said. But "if Obama is supportive of Netanyahu's security agenda, that is the basis of a discussion."

Netanyahu's coalition is not yet final, and he remains in talks with the country's more moderate parties in hopes of creating a broader base in the new parliament. But to assemble a majority, he has had to pull from conservative and religious factions. Depending on the final talks, he could end up with a 65-vote bloc in a 120-member parliament.

Broadly critical of U.S.-backed efforts to forge a Palestinian state, Netanyahu's coalition partners have differing views on the specifics of how to deal with the Palestinians.

Foreign Minister-designate Avigdor Lieberman says he would endorse a Palestinian state as a way to redraw borders to leave Israel with fewer Arabs, an idea that is out of step with most internationally accepted peace proposals. Israeli Arabs, a majority of whom consider themselves Palestinians, make up about 20 percent of the population, and Lieberman would like to include the parts of the country where many of them live in a future Palestine while bringing Jewish settlements into Israel. Lieberman himself lives in the settlement of Nokdim, south of Bethlehem, but has said in published interviews that he would be willing to move as part of a land swap.

A top contender for defense minister, Moshe Yaalon, has opposed territorial concessions to the Palestinians for security reasons. As military chief of staff under then-Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, he opposed the Gaza withdrawal and lost his job. A collection of religious parties expected to be in the coalition hold out hope that settlements can be expanded and more of the West Bank brought into Israel.

Netanyahu himself, said Dermer, "believes the Palestinians should have all the powers necessary for self-governance," but "without the handful of powers that could be used to endanger Israel." That could mean, for example, a state with no army and limited control over its airspace.

Although not opposed to political negotiations, Netanyahu has said he wants to concentrate on Palestinian economic development as a way to build civil institutions and improve relations.

Former Israeli justice minister Yossi Beilin, who helped negotiate the Oslo and Geneva agreements with

the Palestinians and remains active in efforts to push toward Palestinian statehood, said that if Netanyahu is serious about an "economic peace," it would mean lifting West Bank roadblocks that hinder Palestinian movement and commerce, allowing easier movement of Palestinian workers into Israel, and providing a freer exchange of goods between the two societies.

Obama "can go a long way with him," said Beilin, considered a stalwart of the Israeli left. "If there is a determined American administration, there is a chance."

UN envoy: Gaza op seems to be war crime of greatest magnitude

Media Outlet: Haaretz

Date: March 19, 2009

Source Link(s): <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1072481.html> ^[5]

A United Nations human rights investigator said on Thursday that Israel's offensive against Hamas in densely populated Gaza appeared to constitute a war crime of the "greatest magnitude."

Richard Falk, UN special rapporteur on human rights in the Palestinian territories, said the Geneva Conventions required warring forces to distinguish between military targets and surrounding civilians.

"If it is not possible to do so, then launching the attacks is inherently unlawful and would seem to constitute a war crime of the greatest magnitude under international law," Falk said.

"On the basis of the preliminary evidence available, there is reason to reach this conclusion," he wrote in an annual report submitted to the United Nations Human Rights Council.

Falk called for an independent experts group to be set up to probe possible war crimes committed by both Israeli forces and Hamas.

Violations included Israel's alleged "targeting of schools, mosques and ambulances" during the December 27-January 18 offensive and its use of weapons including white phosphorus, as well as Hamas firing of rockets at civilian targets in southern Israel.

Falk said that Israel's blockade of the coastal strip of 1.5 million people violated the Geneva Conventions, which he said suggested further war crimes and possibly crimes against humanity.

The aggression was not legally justified and may represent a "crime against peace" - a principle established at the Nuremberg trials of Nazi criminals, according to the American law professor who serves as the Human Rights Council's independent investigator.

He further suggested that the Security Council might set up an ad hoc criminal tribunal to establish accountability for war crimes in Gaza, noting Israel has not signed the Rome statutes establishing the International Criminal Court.

Rights group names 1,417 Gaza war dead; Israel disputes toll

A Palestinian human rights group has released the names of 1,417 Gazans it says were killed in Israel's recent war on the Palestinian territory's Hamas rulers.

The Palestinian Center for Human Rights said Thursday that of those killed, 926 were civilians, 236 were combatants and 255 were members of the Palestinian security forces.

Most of the policemen were killed in a series of Israeli bombing attacks on Hamas security compounds on December 27, the first day of the war.

The group says it has investigated every civilian death. The list is posted on the center's Web site.

Israeli government spokesman Mark Regev disputes the findings. He says Israel is working on its own list and contends that most of those killed were combatants or legitimate targets.

Thirteen Israelis were killed during the 22-day Gaza operation.

PA says Israel 'ethnically cleansing' east Jerusalem

Media Outlet: Agence France Presse (AFP)

Date: March 19, 2009

Source Link(s): <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3689316,00.html> [6]

The Palestinian Authority accused Israel of 'ethnically cleansing' east Jerusalem of Palestinians, following the tearing down of dozens of buildings in the capital's east.

"There is an unprecedented escalation of the Government of occupation and what they call the municipality of Jerusalem against the Palestinian presence in Jerusalem through the destruction of tens of houses and the issuance of demolition orders against dozens of others," said Nabil Abu Roudeina, a spokesman for Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas.

"This is an infuriating campaign by the municipality to 'Judaize' the city and expel the Palestinian population," he added.

The City of Jerusalem issued dozens of demolition orders against illegally built houses in the east Jerusalem

The UN has also expressed its concern at the measures applied against the Palestinian population in east Jerusalem, issuing a statement reading: "We are very concerned about the Israeli measures in East Jerusalem, including threats of further evictions and destruction of houses in several Palestinian neighborhoods of the city.

"We urge Israel to respond positively to calls from the community interventions to end these unacceptable actions."

'Final word on Schalit yet to be said'

Media Outlet: The Jerusalem Post

Date: March 20, 2009

Source Link(s): <http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1237461632365&pagename=JPost%2FJPAr...>

[7]

Egyptian sources said Friday said a final decision on the Gilad Schalit deal was "yet to be made," a day before the IDF soldier marks 1,000 days in Hamas captivity and his family spends its last hours in a protest tent outside the Prime Minister's Residence in Jerusalem.

Speaking to the London-based Al Hayat newspaper, the sources said a final decision on Schalit will be made before Prime Minister Ehud Olmert leaves office.

The sources said Israel's announcement on Tuesday was "a maneuver intended to pressure Hamas."

The Jerusalem Post could not confirm Al Hayat's report.

The Schalit family and supporters in the tent near the Prime Minister's Residence in Jerusalem intend to hold a short ceremony on Friday night, when the thousandth day of Schalit's captivity begins. A group of a few dozen teens said they would continue to man the protest tent without a time limit.

On Thursday, amid reports that Israel was considering employing pressure tactics on Hamas, including a worsening of the imprisonment conditions of Palestinian held in Israel jails, an official in the Islamic group said that "any attempt of this kind would make the kidnapped soldiers into a new Ron Arad."

What hopes now for peace in the Middle East?

Article Author(s): Donald MacIntyre

Media Outlet: The Independent

Date: March 20, 2009

Source Link(s): <http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/donald-macintyre/donald-macint...> [8]

The stark headline on yesterday's New York Times read "Israel faces isolation as new leader gets ready". The report referred to the backlash against the recent offensive in Gaza. But a bigger theme was Israeli concern at overseas reaction to the imminent premiership of a man for whom a two-state solution is not a priority ? not to mention his appointment of a nationalist demagogue, Avigdor Lieberman, as Foreign Minister.

Nothing is ever for sure in Israeli politics till it happens. Labour's Ehud Barak could yet join Benjamin Netanyahu's government. Though less likely still, Tzipi Livni could still come aboard, presumably displacing Mr Lieberman as Foreign minister. This would certainly be better for Israel's international image. But would such a government, whatever its other merits, necessarily be an advance towards the ever more elusive-seeming goal of a negotiated peace?

Possibly not. The abject failures of the most recent process occurred under Ehud Olmert, a professed convert, however late, to just such a peace. He will no doubt blame the weakness of Mahmoud Abbas, ruling only in the West Bank. But it was Mr Olmert's government which accelerated expansion of settlement-building in the wake ? and in defiance ? of the Annapolis summit of 15 months ago.

The idea behind Annapolis was to make such progress in negotiations and in improving daily life in the West Bank, that the Palestinian people, including in Gaza, would, Hamas or no Hamas, vote for what

would finally have become a tangible two-state solution. The reality was a hollow process, a journey towards a mirage. It's hard to imagine that Ms Livni, locked into a Netanyahu government, would do more than repeat such a process. But the danger is that the West would then simply give the same course ? "Annapolis on steroids" as some diplomats waggishly call it ? another run.

For all its real dangers, the one advantage of a narrow right-wing government is that it may concentrate minds in Washington on the need for a new approach. George Mitchell, President Obama's envoy, has already talked of the need for "a plan" rather than a process. By laying out its own parameters for a just peace, the US might just confront Netanyahu with the stark choice between compliance or the kind of rift with Washington that helped to sink his first government in 1999.

Netanyahu's chief preoccupation is Iran. Some Western politicians have been talking of a grand bargain in which Syria would be brought in from the cold, and in which a formidable Western-Arab alliance would be brought to bear against Iran's presumed plans for military nuclearisation. In return Netanyahu would have to offer something of his own.

And what better than to sign up to the Arab peace initiative under which Israel would be recognised by all its neighbours in return for a Palestinian state broadly along 1967 borders? After all, even though he has refused to countenance it in public, Netanyahu has privately told some diplomats ? Quartet envoy Tony Blair among them ? that he could contemplate an eventual Palestinian state.

There are, however, serious problems with this optimistic, if impeccably logical, scenario. One is the nascent difference between Washington and its European allies about how you get there. The former sees little future in Fatah-Hamas talks on a Palestinian unity government, without two preconditions: a Salam Fayyad premiership and ? the very unlikely ? agreement by Hamas to the famous Quartet principles, including recognition of Israel. Otherwise the US still appears to prefer a "West Bank first" strategy in which Hamas is ignored and improvements in the West Bank economy and resumed political negotiations would pave the way for President Abbas to win elections next year.

The Europeans ? including Britain ? would prefer to wait for the outcome of Fatah-Hamas talks, and judge it accordingly, arguing that a technocratic unity government provides the best chance both for Gaza's post-war reconstruction and for preventing Hamas from scuppering any diplomatic progress.

Another problem is the hard-core extremism in any narrow right-wing government that Netanyahu is likely to form. Debate about Lieberman has eclipsed another potential coalition partner, the ultra-nationalist National Union, implacably opposed to any partition and one of whose leading Knesset members is a former member of the outlawed and indisputably racist Kach organisation. And all this when increasingly few Palestinians and Israelis believe in the viability of the two-state solution they tell pollsters they would prefer.

That said, the one real legacy of Olmert's premiership, now in its final days, may be his prophecy that Israel is "finished" the day hope for such a solution runs out. Predictions of progress in the Middle East remain a triumph of hope over experience. But the new dynamic may at least afford Israel's true allies the opportunity to show they sometimes know better than Israel itself how to guarantee its future.

US makes demands on Palestinian unity government

Media Outlet: Agence France Presse (AFP)

Date: March 19, 2009

Source Link(s): <http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5ishRgcV2XnTdFA23DwljHfrhIAuA>

[9]

WASHINGTON (AFP) ? The United States said Thursday that Hamas must be committed to non-violence and meet other international demands before Washington can recognize a Palestinian unity government with the radical group's members.

The statement referred to the quartet of the United States, United Nations, Russia and the European Union, which have mapped out the conditions for pursuing Palestinian-Israeli peace.

"The quartet has repeatedly called for Palestinian unity in support of a government committed to non-violence, recognition of Israel, and acceptance of previous agreements and obligations," the State Department said.

"We understand this to be the position of Egypt and of the Arab League as well," the State Department statement said.

However, Hamas rejects the conditions.

The statement came following key talks in Washington this week involving Egyptian intelligence chief Omar Suleiman, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Middle East envoy George Mitchell and senior diplomat Jeffrey Feltman.

The Egyptian government said Suleiman was in Washington to seek a softer stance on the Islamist movement Hamas, which rules the Gaza Strip, so that it can participate in an internationally-recognized Palestinian unity government.

However, the State Department statement poured cold water on the idea.

"Media reports that Mr. Suleiman was here to press the United States to be more flexible on its position that any unity government must adhere to previous PLO commitments are unfounded," it said.

The Palestine Liberation Organization signed agreements that gave birth to the Palestinian Authority, the US-backed group with which Israel conducts negotiations.

The negotiations in Cairo between the rival Palestinian groups were suspended because of disagreements over setting up a national unity government, but they are due to resume in a few days.

'Shooting and crying'

Article Author(s): Amos Harel

Media Outlet: Haaretz

Date: March 20, 2009

Source Link(s): <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1072475.html> [10]

Less than a month after the end of Operation Cast Lead in the Gaza Strip, dozens of graduates of the Yitzhak Rabin pre-military preparatory program convened at Oranim Academic College in Kiryat Tivon.

Since 1998 the program has prepared participants for what is considered meaningful military service. Many assume command positions in combat and other elite units of the Israel Defense Forces. The program's founder, Danny Zamir, still heads it today and also serves as deputy battalion commander in a reserve unit.

The previous Friday, February 13, Zamir had invited combat soldiers and officers who graduated the program for a lengthy discussion of their experiences in Gaza. They spoke openly, but also with considerable frustration.

Following are extensive excerpts from the transcript of the meeting, as it appears in the program's bulletin, Briza, which was published on Wednesday. The names of the soldiers have been changed to preserve their anonymity. The editors have also left out some of the details concerning the identity of the units that operated in a problematic way in Gaza.

Danny Zamir: "I don't intend for us to evaluate the achievements and the diplomatic-political significance of Operation Cast Lead this evening, nor need we deal with the systemic military aspect [of it]. However, discussion is necessary because this was, all told, an exceptional war action in terms of the history of the IDF, which has set new limits for the army's ethical code and that of the State of Israel as a whole.

"This is an action that sowed massive destruction among civilians. It is not certain that it was possible to have done it differently, but ultimately we have emerged from this operation and are not facing real paralysis from the Qassams. It is very possible that we will repeat such an operation on a larger scale in the years to come, because the problem in the Gaza Strip is not simple and it is not at all certain that it has been solved. What we want this evening is to hear from the fighters."

Aviv: "I am squad commander of a company that is still in training, from the Givati Brigade. We went into a neighborhood in the southern part of Gaza City. Altogether, this is a special experience. In the course of the training, you wait for the day you will go into Gaza, and in the end it isn't really like they say it is. It's more like, you come, you take over a house, you kick the tenants out and you move in. We stayed in a house for something like a week.

"Toward the end of the operation there was a plan to go into a very densely populated area inside Gaza City itself. In the briefings they started to talk to us about orders for opening fire inside the city, because as you know they used a huge amount of firepower and killed a huge number of people along the way, so that we wouldn't get hurt and they wouldn't fire on us.

"At first the specified action was to go into a house. We were supposed to go in with an armored personnel carrier called an Achzarit [literally, Cruel] to burst through the lower door, to start shooting inside and then ... I call this murder ... in effect, we were supposed to go up floor by floor, and any person we identified - we were supposed to shoot. I initially asked myself: Where is the logic in this?

"From above they said it was permissible, because anyone who remained in the sector and inside Gaza City was in effect condemned, a terrorist, because they hadn't fled. I didn't really understand: On the one hand they don't really have anywhere to flee to, but on the other hand they're telling us they hadn't fled so it's their fault ... This also scared me a bit. I tried to exert some influence, insofar as is possible from within my subordinate position, to change this. In the end the specification involved going into a house, operating megaphones and telling [the tenants]: 'Come on, everyone get out, you have five minutes, leave the house, anyone who doesn't get out gets killed.'

"I went to our soldiers and said, 'The order has changed. We go into the house, they have five minutes to escape, we check each person who goes out individually to see that he has no weapons, and then we start

going into the house floor by floor to clean it out ... This means going into the house, opening fire at everything that moves, throwing a grenade, all those things. And then there was a very annoying moment. One of my soldiers came to me and asked, 'Why?' I said, 'What isn't clear? We don't want to kill innocent civilians.' He goes, 'Yeah? Anyone who's in there is a terrorist, that's a known fact.' I said, 'Do you think the people there will really run away? No one will run away.' He says, 'That's clear,' and then his buddies join in: 'We need to murder any person who's in there. Yeah, any person who's in Gaza is a terrorist,' and all the other things that they stuff our heads with, in the media.

"And then I try to explain to the guy that not everyone who is in there is a terrorist, and that after he kills, say, three children and four mothers, we'll go upstairs and kill another 20 or so people. And in the end it turns out that [there are] eight floors times five apartments on a floor - something like a minimum of 40 or 50 families that you murder. I tried to explain why we had to let them leave, and only then go into the houses. It didn't really help. This is really frustrating, to see that they understand that inside Gaza you are allowed to do anything you want, to break down doors of houses for no reason other than it's cool.

"You do not get the impression from the officers that there is any logic to it, but they won't say anything. To write 'death to the Arabs' on the walls, to take family pictures and spit on them, just because you can. I think this is the main thing in understanding how much the IDF has fallen in the realm of ethics, really. It's what I'll remember the most."

"One of our officers, a company commander, saw someone coming on some road, a woman, an old woman. She was walking along pretty far away, but close enough so you could take out someone you saw there. If she were suspicious, not suspicious - I don't know. In the end, he sent people up to the roof, to take her out with their weapons. From the description of this story, I simply felt it was murder in cold blood."

Zamir: "I don't understand. Why did he shoot her?"

Aviv: "That's what is so nice, supposedly, about Gaza: You see a person on a road, walking along a path. He doesn't have to be with a weapon, you don't have to identify him with anything and you can just shoot him. With us it was an old woman, on whom I didn't see any weapon. The order was to take the person out, that woman, the moment you see her."

Zvi: "Aviv's descriptions are accurate, but it's possible to understand where this is coming from. And that woman, you don't know whether she's ... She wasn't supposed to be there, because there were announcements and there were bombings. Logic says she shouldn't be there. The way you describe it, as murder in cold blood, that isn't right. It's known that they have lookouts and that sort of thing."

Gilad: "Even before we went in, the battalion commander made it clear to everyone that a very important lesson from the Second Lebanon War was the way the IDF goes in - with a lot of fire. The intention was to protect soldiers' lives by means of firepower. In the operation the IDF's losses really were light and the price was that a lot of Palestinians got killed."

Ram: "I serve in an operations company in the Givati Brigade. After we'd gone into the first houses, there was a house with a family inside. Entry was relatively calm. We didn't open fire, we just yelled at everyone to come down. We put them in a room and then left the house and entered it from a different lot. A few days after we went in, there was an order to release the family. They had set up positions upstairs. There was a sharpshooters' position on the roof. The platoon commander let the family go and told them to go to the right. One mother and her two children didn't understand and went to the left, but they forgot to tell the sharpshooter on the roof they had let them go, and it was okay and he should hold his fire and he ... he did what he was supposed to, like he was following his orders."

Question from the audience: "At what range was this?"

Ram: "Between 100 and 200 meters, something like that. They had also come out of the house that he was on the roof of, they had advanced a bit and suddenly he saw then, people moving around in an area where they were forbidden to move around. I don't think he felt too bad about it, because after all, as far as he was concerned, he did his job according to the orders he was given. And the atmosphere in general, from what I understood from most of my men who I talked to ... I don't know how to describe it The lives of Palestinians, let's say, is something very, very less important than the lives of our soldiers. So as far as they are concerned they can justify it that way."

Yuval Friedman (chief instructor at the Rabin program): "Wasn't there a standing order to request permission to open fire?"

Ram: "No. It exists, beyond a certain line. The idea is that you are afraid that they are going to escape from you. If a terrorist is approaching and he is too close, he could blow up the house or something like that."

Zamir: "After a killing like that, by mistake, do they do some sort of investigation in the IDF? Do they look into how they could have corrected it?"

Ram: "They haven't come from the Military Police's investigative unit yet. There hasn't been any ... For all incidents, there are individual investigations and general examinations, of all of the conduct of the war. But they haven't focused on this specifically."

Moshe: "The attitude is very simple: It isn't pleasant to say so, but no one cares at all. We aren't investigating this. This is what happens during fighting and this is what happens during routine security."

Ram: "What I do remember in particular at the beginning is the feeling of almost a religious mission. My sergeant is a student at a hesder yeshiva [a program that combines religious study and military service]. Before we went in, he assembled the whole platoon and led the prayer for those going into battle. A brigade rabbi was there, who afterward came into Gaza and went around patting us on the shoulder and encouraging us, and praying with people. And also when we were inside they sent in those booklets, full of Psalms, a ton of Psalms. I think that at least in the house I was in for a week, we could have filled a room with the Psalms they sent us, and other booklets like that.

"There was a huge gap between what the Education Corps sent out and what the IDF rabbinate sent out. The Education Corps published a pamphlet for commanders - something about the history of Israel's fighting in Gaza from 1948 to the present. The rabbinate brought in a lot of booklets and articles, and ... their message was very clear: We are the Jewish people, we came to this land by a miracle, God brought us back to this land and now we need to fight to expel the gentiles who are interfering with our conquest of this holy land. This was the main message, and the whole sense many soldiers had in this operation was of a religious war. From my position as a commander and 'explainer,' I attempted to talk about the politics - the streams in Palestinian society, about how not everyone who is in Gaza is Hamas, and not every inhabitant wants to vanquish us. I wanted to explain to the soldiers that this war is not a war for the sanctification of the holy name, but rather one to stop the Qassams."

Zamir: "I would like to ask the pilots who are here, Gideon and Yonatan, to tell us a little about their perspective. As an infantryman, this has always interested me. How does it feel when you bomb a city like that?"

Gideon: "First of all, about what you have said concerning the crazy amounts of firepower: Right in the first foray in the fighting, the quantities were very impressive, very large, and this is mainly what sent all the

Hamasniks into hiding in the deepest shelters and kept them from showing their faces until some two weeks after the fighting.

"In general the way that it works for us, just so you will understand the differences a bit, is that at night I would come to the squadron, do one foray in Gaza and go home to sleep. I go home to sleep in Tel Aviv, in my warm bed. I'm not stuck in a bed in the home of a Palestinian family, so life is a little better.

"When I'm with the squadron, I don't see a terrorist who is launching a Qassam and then decide to fly out to get him. There is a whole system that supports us, that serves as eyes, ears and intelligence for every plane that takes off, and creates more and more targets in real-time, of one level of legitimacy or another. In any case, I try to believe that these are targets [determined according to] the highest possible level of legitimacy.

"They dropped leaflets over Gaza and would sometimes fire a missile from a helicopter into the corner of some house, just to shake up the house a bit so everyone inside would flee. These things worked. The families came out, and really people [i.e., soldiers] did enter houses that were pretty empty, at least of innocent civilians. From this perspective it works.

"In any case, I arrive at the squadron, I get a target with a description and coordinates, and basically just make sure it isn't within the line of our forces. I look at the picture of the house I am suppose to attack, I see that it matches reality, I take off, I push the button and the bomb takes itself exactly to within one meter of the target itself."

Zamir: "Among the pilots, is there also talk or thoughts of remorse? For example, I was terribly surprised by the enthusiasm surrounding the killing of the Gaza traffic police on the first day of the operation: They took out 180 traffic cops. As a pilot, I would have questioned that."

Gideon: "There are two parts to this. Tactically speaking, you call them 'police.' In any case, they are armed and belong to Hamas ... During better times, they take Fatah people and throw them off the roofs and see what happens.

"With regard to the thoughts, you sit with the squadron and there are lots of discussions about the value-related significance of the fighting, about what we are doing; there is a lot to talk about. From the moment you start the plane's engine until the moment you turn it off, all of your thoughts, all of your concentration and all of your attention are on the mission you have to carry out. If you have an unjustified doubt, you're liable to cause a far greater screw-up and knock down a school with 40 children. If the building I hit isn't the one I am supposed to hit, but rather a house with our guys inside - the price of the mistake is very, very high."

Question from the audience: "Was there anyone in the squadron who didn't push the button, who thought twice?"

Gideon: "That question should be addressed to those involved in the helicopter operation, or to the guys who see what they do. With the weapons I used, my ability to make a decision that contradicts what they told me up to that point is zero. I dispatch the bomb from a range within which I can see the entire Gaza Strip. I also see Haifa, I also see Sinai, but it's more or less the same. It's from really far away."

Yossi: "I am a platoon sergeant in an operations company of the Paratroops Brigade. We were in a house and discovered a family inside that wasn't supposed to be there. We assembled them all in the basement, posted two guards at all times and made sure they didn't make any trouble. Gradually, the emotional distance between us broke down - we had cigarettes with them, we drank coffee with them, we talked

about the meaning of life and the fighting in Gaza. After very many conversations the owner of the house, a man of 70-plus, was saying it's good we are in Gaza and it's good that the IDF is doing what it is doing.

"The next day we sent the owner of the house and his son, a man of 40 or 50, for questioning. The day after that, we received an answer: We found out that both are political activists in Hamas. That was a little annoying - that they tell you how fine it is that you're here and good for you and blah-blah-blah, and then you find out that they were lying to your face the whole time.

"What annoyed me was that in the end, after we understood that the members of this family weren't exactly our good friends and they pretty much deserved to be forcibly ejected from there, my platoon commander suggested that when we left the house, we should clean up all the stuff, pick up and collect all the garbage in bags, sweep and wash the floor, fold up the blankets we used, make a pile of the mattresses and put them back on the beds."

Zamir: "What do you mean? Didn't every IDF unit that left a house do that?"

Yossi: "No. Not at all. On the contrary: In most of the houses graffiti was left behind and things like that."

Zamir: "That's simply behaving like animals."

Yossi: "You aren't supposed to be concentrating on folding blankets when you're being shot at."

Zamir: "I haven't heard all that much about you being shot at. It's not that I'm complaining, but if you've spent a week in a home, clean up your filth."

Aviv: "We got an order one day: All of the equipment, all of the furniture - just clean out the whole house. We threw everything, everything, out of the windows to make room. The entire contents of the house went flying out the windows."

Yossi: "There was one day when a Katyusha, a Grad, landed in Be'er Sheva and a mother and her baby were moderately to seriously injured. They were neighbors of one of my soldiers. We heard the whole story on the radio, and he didn't take it lightly - that his neighbors were seriously hurt. So the guy was a bit antsy, and you can understand him. To tell a person like that, 'Come on, let's wash the floor of the house of a political activist in Hamas, who has just fired a Katyusha at your neighbors that has amputated one of their legs' - this isn't easy to do, especially if you don't agree with it at all. When my platoon commander said, 'Okay, tell everyone to fold up blankets and pile up mattresses,' it wasn't easy for me to take. There was a lot of shouting. In the end I was convinced and realized it really was the right thing to do. Today I appreciate and even admire him, the platoon commander, for what happened there. In the end I don't think that any army, the Syrian army, the Afghani army, would wash the floor of its enemy's houses, and it certainly wouldn't fold blankets and put them back in the closets."

Zamir: "I think it would be important for parents to sit here and hear this discussion. I think it would be an instructive discussion, and also very dismaying and depressing. You are describing an army with very low value norms, that's the truth ... I am not judging you and I am not complaining about you. I'm just reflecting what I'm feeling after hearing your stories. I wasn't in Gaza, and I assume that among reserve soldiers the level of restraint and control is higher, but I think that all in all, you are reflecting and describing the kind of situation we were in.

"After the Six-Day War, when people came back from the fighting, they sat in circles and described what they had been through. For many years the people who did this were said to be 'shooting and crying.' In 1983, when we came back from the Lebanon War, the same things were said about us. We need to think

about the events we have been through. We need to grapple with them also, in terms of establishing a standard or different norms.

"It is quite possible that Hamas and the Syrian army would behave differently from me. The point is that we aren't Hamas and we aren't the Syrian army or the Egyptian army, and if clerics are anointing us with oil and sticking holy books in our hands, and if the soldiers in these units aren't representative of the whole spectrum in the Jewish people, but rather of certain segments of the population - what are we expecting? To whom are we complaining?

"As reservists we don't take orders seriously to the orders of the regional brigades. We let the old people go through and we let families go through. Why kill people when it's clear to you that they are civilians? Which aspect of Israel's security will be harmed, who will be harmed? Exercise judgment, be human."

Can There be Hope in the Israeli-Palestinian Peace Talks?

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With Avigdor Lieberman set to join the next Israeli government and Israel clamping down with more Hamas arrests this week, it is even less easy than usual to generate much hope for a peaceful settlement between Israelis and Palestinians.

But there has been one intriguing glimmer of a more hopeful future emerging from that small fragment of popular culture that is shared by Israelis and Palestinians alike. Noa, a popular Israeli singer and peace activist, was asked last year to make a bid to represent Israel at this year's Eurovision song contest in Moscow in May.

Noa in turn asked her friend Mira Awad, a Palestinian actress, to join her. They jointly performed a song with the clearly meaningful title "There Must Be Another Way," with verses in Hebrew and Arabic. After a vote among TV viewers, it was chosen as Israel's official entry.

The symbolism is heavy; two young women friends and performers, using both languages and representing both cultures to represent the demographic and multi-cultural reality of today's Israel, challenge a host of prejudices and preconceptions about the country.

But with the launching of Israel's military actions against Gaza last year, Mira has inevitably come under fire from others in the Palestinian community who accuse her of becoming a pawn in the greater game of Israeli propaganda. At the same time, the success of Lieberman's Yisrael Beiteinu party in Israel's elections has shifted the dynamics of Israeli politics.

Lieberman's party secured sufficient votes to win a prominent place in the new government, expected to be formed by Likud's Benjamin Netanyahu. Lieberman, who has in the past called for the expulsion of Palestinians from Israel, will become foreign minister. Bear in mind that his slogan during the election, directed at the Arabs within Israel, was the crudely uncompromising "No loyalty, no citizenship."

Which is the real Israel, Lieberman or Mira and Noa with their song "There Must Be Another Way?"

The obvious but tragic answer is that both represent the reality of modern Israel and the schizoid nature of its politics, just as Mira and Hamas each represent another reality - the equally schizoid nature of Palestinian politics. Two fractured communities argue among themselves in the middle of an Israeli state that is itself deeply divided, even as it continues to occupy Palestinian territory that the existing Israeli government of outgoing Prime Minister Ehud Olmert wants to become a separate state.

This deep confusion explains the conviction among many in the Middle East that only an outside agency, and in reality only the United States, has any chance of forging a peace settlement and making it stick. The fact that U.S. engagement and pressure in the past have not succeeded, even with spasmodic backing from other players in the wider Arab world, does not seem to have shaken this view.

But just possibly there is another and more hopeful current emerging within Israeli and Palestinian society that is cultural rather than political, and Noa and Mira represent it. Wish them luck in Moscow.

The Dangers of Indulging Extremism? from the Taliban to Israel

Article Author(s): Raghida Dergham

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New York - Indulging extremism and adapting to it is not in the interest of the US, nor is it favorable to the future of the Middle East. What is meant here is not Islamic extremism alone, but also Jewish extremism, as it characterizes Israel's inclinations during the present phase. It is thus necessary for President Barack Obama to demand that the members of his cabinet, his envoys and his advisers place before him a comprehensive strategy, one that addresses the challenges of Israeli, Arab and Iranian extremism, not in order to temporarily absorb radicalism, but rather to effectively and comprehensively support moderation, reform, modernity and justice. It is necessary for the forces of moderation, especially amongst Arabs, to formulate a rational strategy of their own as well, one that would drive their stances forward at the local, regional, US and international levels.

Such a strategy should not be exclusively political, but rather one in which economy and politics would complement each other, and in which measures for internal reform, social as well as political and economic, would be taken without delays or prevarication. Indeed, moderates should not be afraid to wage the war against extremism with a serious vision based on local responsibility and international partnership. They must rush to formulate a detailed and comprehensive view of the ideology of moderation and the standing of political secularism in non-extremist rule. The opportunity is now ripe to influence the political direction that will be taken not just by the new US President, but also by the global partnerships his policies will produce, especially with countries such as China and Russia, in addition to how these partnerships will reflect on regional conflicts.

Indeed, President Obama seems eager for policies that would reflect his character and his thinking. However, he is clear about listening not just to the advice of political experts but also to that of seasoned generals. Hence it is important to contribute to putting forth issues, stances, opinions and strategies before him, instead of remaining in the corner of waiting and predictions, behind the door of frustration and

disappointment.

President Obama seems ready to launch a new policy to resolve regional conflicts, starting from Afghanistan, one that relies on civilian/military strategy, such as an influx of hundreds of US diplomats into Afghanistan coinciding with preparations to move 17 thousand troops to gradually build a greater and longer military presence, the goals of which would be broader than the area of Afghanistan alone.

Military and political experts describe this military plan not as a policy of reinforcing military presence in preparation for withdrawal, but rather as one of sending 17 thousand now, then 17 others in a few months, as part of building forces to stay.

Sending hundreds of American diplomats to Afghanistan within the framework of a policy of civilian diplomatic mobilization - by the hundreds - to accompany military mobilization - by the thousands - is an intelligent and far-sighted policy. What is new about it is that it is of the making of members of the military, not only of the making of civilians in the new administration.

President Barack Obama has made clear all the appreciation he has for US military leaders, and that he places his trust in the military high command to define US policy towards Iraq and Afghanistan, and perhaps also towards Iran, as it is the neighbor of both. It is in fact the military high command that found it beneficial to enter into partnership with the civilian aspect of US policy, this at two levels: that of US policy in zones of conflict, so as not to appear aggressive or strictly military, and that of local partnerships between US troops and local forces - civilian or non-civilian - in order to achieve goals.

The man most famous in this respect is General David Petraeus, the Commander of US Central Command, who introduced the idea of partnership with Awakening Councils in Iraq. He is one of the main pillars of US policy-making under President Obama, entrusted with the issues of Iraq and Afghanistan alongside Defense Secretary Robert Gates, knowing that the National Security Adviser is also a military man, General James Jones.

The US President may have pleased some of the political experts outside or inside his administration when he spoke of addressing the moderates amongst the Taliban in order to form a semi-partnership with them to fight the extremist radicals within the movement and perhaps also within Al-Qaeda. Members of the military, however, sat in their seats and waited patiently for the new president to start climbing downwards after having been too hasty in announcing such intent.

Some found that comparing between addressing Awakening Councils in Iraq and addressing "moderates amongst the Taliban" was complete nonsense, not only because it is wrong to liken the Awakening Councils to the Taliban as being Islamic radicalism. Militarily, it was a poor comparison, as the Awakening Councils were in dire need of partnership with US troops to save them from what they considered to be "the rule of Qom" in Iraq. As for the Taliban, they are - in their opinion - in no need of partnership or of saving, but rather are "victorious" and do not wish to compromise on their victory.

US strategy towards Afghanistan is unusual, complex and can sustain many a test. In principle, there is bitter debate over whether it would be better for the US to decide that the Taliban and what they do to the people of Afghanistan - including the atrocious violations at the humanitarian level - are none of America's business, and that what the US is concerned with is exclusively what the Taliban do in terms of globally exporting terrorism and locally sponsoring it by offering bases to Al-Qaeda and others. Those who are of this opinion are, effectively, pulling the rug from under the feet of all those who might have thought that the United States had been sincere when it had believed and claimed to support moving Afghanistan to a state of normalcy and relative moderation, and to cling to the defense of human rights, and particularly not to

allow what the Taliban did to women and young girls in Afghanistan to be repeated.

Those who are of this opinion today promote abandoning President Hamid Karzai, not because there is an alternative with a greater ability for reform and a greater commitment to the promised course, but rather simply because they have decided that the interest of the US requires "pragmatism". Such "pragmatism" has concluded that the US will not be able to win the war in Afghanistan nor to defeat Al-Qaeda and the likes of it through Afghanistan. Thus there is no alternative but to strike this kind of hidden deal with the Taliban on the basis of "help us - we will ignore you? challenge us - we will punish you".

Those who oppose this opinion do so not only because of its political and moral disadvantages with regards to the situation in Afghanistan, but rather because of how it reflects beyond Afghanistan - in terms of the disturbing message the US leadership would be sending on the international scene, as well as the message such a policy would send to other players of the same kind as the Taliban in different parts of the world - and of the Muslim World in particular.

The debate is bitter and in fact nearly represents a battle between the political staff among which some believed that the return of the Democrats to power would return them to the job they had started and never finished, and the political/military staff which behaves with a completely different kind of intellectual "pragmatism".

Those who promote such thinking say the following: the US will not shrink before the Taliban in Afghanistan, because Afghanistan is extremely important in new partnerships such as the partnership with Russia, and because losing the battle in Afghanistan means losing a greater war against Islamic radicalism, spread from the Caucasus to Chechnya.

They say: we will not be hasty in embracing Nawaz Sharif as a leader in Pakistan just because the lawyers are dwarfing incumbent President Zardari. The latter is indeed a bad alternative for Pervez Musharraf, but the worse alternative would be Nawaz Sharif in all of his extremism and dangerous inclinations.

They say that Pakistan today, in all that it contains and produces in terms of deep-seated fear, is not a country the United States can decide that it can do without - as is the case with Afghanistan - because the dangers of Pakistan and Afghanistan are not local but rather international.

They say: let the generals think deeply of US influence in Iraq and Afghanistan in the present and in the future, and of how it would be possible to implement the military/civilian policy to strengthen the military institution and to free the political institution. This in turn will make clear the features and choices that will dictate US policy towards Iran.

Those who think of the next phase of US policy do not base their views on removing the military option then retreating to a constrained policy towards Iran. They base them on the intelligent and rational use of military options then moving up to a realistic policy, a civilian policy and a firm policy towards Iran and the likes of it. They understand the interpenetration of political, economic and military factors in traditional and realistic strategies, based on the language of strength and greatness in the classical sense.

They understand - as one of them stated - that Russia has won the pipeline war, in reference to the gas and oil pipelines over which major powers compete, and that Russia - regardless of such a victory - is in need of the partnerships sought-after with the US in Afghanistan and towards Iran and Pakistan. They are ready for this kind of deal ("help us, we'll help you") and not for shady deals with questionable groups such as the Taliban and the so-called moderates among the ranks of extremist radicalism wherever it may be. Indeed, indulging extremism is not part of the new crew's lexicon in US policy-making, taking its depth in

military/civilian strategy. Such a crew believes in the thoughts, emotions and principles of President Barack Obama, but relies on a form of realism more lucid than the pragmatism of civilians.

Afghanistan may not be directly important for the Arabs or in the strategy of the ranks of moderation, as they believe that they should focus on Palestine, Iraq and Iran, and on Arab reconciliations and disagreements before, during and after summits. Of course, such an approach is short-sighted because what US policy succeeds or fails at in Afghanistan or in Iraq has a radical impact on restraining or setting loose the Islamic Republic, especially as it is going through a transitional period, is internally unstable and is suffering economically much more than it recognizes and admits.

However, the policy of Arab moderation should not be under one headline, but rather must have a realistically all-encompassing perspective, one of audacity and not of idleness. Hence, and in view of the important development on the Israeli scene represented by eluding - or in fact rejecting the choice of the two states as a solution to be negotiated, the forces of Arab moderation must formulate a bold and offensive strategy that would show the meaning of eluding the two-state solution, and would show that the alternative choice which Israel puts on the table is the choice of ethnic cleansing aimed at establishing a pure Jewish state, devoid of all who are not Jewish. Bringing such a reality to light will in itself, with a simple and clear strategy without apologetics, fear or hesitation, be of radical help in uncovering the features and dangers of extremism, regardless of sect, religion and ideology. Indeed, extremism is the enemy and moderation should dare to wage the war against it.

The problem with moderation is that it tries to please and dreams of coexistence without a battle. The fact of the matter is that this is a war of survival and a war for the future. Moderation must now be a little extreme in order to tell those who speak pompous words that extreme moderation is the necessary partner in building a safe future, not moderate extremism, because there can be no moderation in extremism under any circumstances or by any explanation.

Soldier says rabbis pushed "religious war" in Gaza

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Date: March 20, 2009

Source Link(s): <http://www.reuters.com/article/featuredCrisis/idUSLK403734> ^[13]

JERUSALEM, March 20 (Reuters) - Rabbis in the Israeli army told battlefield troops in January's Gaza offensive that they were fighting a "religious war" against gentiles, according to one army commander's account published on Friday.

"Their message was very clear: we are the Jewish people, we came to this land by a miracle, God brought us back to this land and now we need to fight to expel the gentiles who are interfering with our conquest of this holy land," he said.

The account by Ram, a pseudonym to shield the soldier's identity, was published by the left-leaning Haaretz newspaper in the second day of revelations that have rocked the Israeli military. (www.haaretz.com ^[14] "Shooting and Crying, 2009").

They were leaked from a Feb 13 meeting of armed forces members to share their Gaza experiences. Some veterans, alumni of an Israel Defence Force (IDF) military academy, told of the killing of civilians and

their impression that deep contempt for Palestinians pervaded the ranks of the Israeli forces.

The institution's director, Danny Zamir, confirmed that Thursday's published accounts were authentic.

In longer excerpts in its Friday "Week's End" edition, the daily quoted 'Ram' as saying his impression of the 22-day operation was "the feeling of an almost religious mission".

It began when a devout sergeant in his unit "assembled the whole platoon and led the prayer for those going into battle", he said. "Also when we were inside they sent in those booklets full of Psalms, a ton of Psalms. I think the house I was in for a week, we could have filled a room with the Psalms they sent."

The officer felt there was a "huge gap between what the Education Corps sent out and what the IDF rabbinate sent out".

The corps distributed pamphlets about the history of Israel's fighting in Gaza from 1948 to the present, he said.

But the rabbinate's message imparted to many soldiers the sense that "this operation was a religious war".

"ALL TERRORISTS"

A squad commander from Ram's Givat Brigade, named as Aviv, recounted his misgivings about orders to break down doors with armoured vehicles and shoot anyone inside, floor by floor. In the event, the order was amended to include "operating megaphones" so advancing troops could tell people they had five minutes to get out or be killed.

Aviv said "there was a very annoying moment" when he briefed his men and one challenged that order, saying: "Yeah? Anyone who is in there is a terrorist, that's a known fact..."

"And then his buddies join in: 'We need to murder any person who's in there, yeah, any person who's in Gaza is a terrorist' and all the other things that they stuff our heads with, in the media," Aviv was quoted as saying.

The Palestinian Center for Human Rights (PCHR) has put the Palestinian death toll during the war at 1,417 -- 926 civilians, 236 fighters and 255 police officers. Israeli officials have disputed those figures. Thirteen Israelis were killed.

On Thursday, an Israeli think-tank, the International Policy Institute for Counter-Terrorism, challenged the conclusion that close to 1,000 Gaza civilians were killed. It said a statistical analysis of PCHR's list of civilian casualties showed a disproportionate number of young men of fighting age.

Defence Minister Ehud Barak responded to the IDF revelations on Thursday by repeating Israel's description of its armed forces as the most moral in the world. The IDF said its judge advocate-general had ordered an investigation.

According to a soldier named as Moshe, investigations into battlefield conduct are not taken seriously. He said the attitude could be summed up as:

"It isn't pleasant to say so, but no one cares at all. We aren't investigating this. This is what happens during fighting..."

Staring into the heart of Hamas

Media Outlet: The Canberra Times

Date: March 20, 2009

Source Link(s): <http://www.canberratimes.com.au/news/world/world/general/staring-into-the-heart-...> [15]

The tea cup stops short of his lip, as Khalid Mishal pauses to consider the ironies of trench warfare in the Middle East: a lurch to the political right has anointed as Israel's next prime minister the man who, 11 years ago, sent Mossad agents on a bizarre mission to assassinate Mishal.

In September 1997, Benjamin Netanyahu was prime minister of Israel, an office to which he is expected to return in the coming days. The intended victim of this James-Bond-becomes-Beagle-Boys plot was Mishal. Back then the thick-set Mishal was a mid-level operative in Hamas - but today he heads the Islamist resistance movement from a heavily guarded lair in Damascus.

It is late on Wednesday evening and Mishal sits deep in a plump armchair, in a second-floor reception room. "Netanyahu," he says, returning to his cup of tea. "It's fate, God's destiny, but we can't set policy on the basis of personal grudges."

The Palestinian resistance leader, whose suicide bombers and assassins have taken their own toll on Israeli life over the years, then declares his would-be-killer to be a man of straw.

"We've already experienced Netanyahu as prime minister of Israel, so Palestinians are not afraid of him second time round," Mishal vouches.

"After the battle of Gaza [in December-January] and the steadfastness of our people in the face of the Zionist war machine, do you expect a single Palestinian to be scared of this man? It doesn't matter if he tries again to kill me, because he has already killed my people."

Set against a scrabbly hillside at the back of a secure enclave that is reserved for high officials of the Syrian regime, foreign diplomats and NGO staff, Mishal's Damascus bunker is an unmarked, nondescript apartment block that doubles as jihad headquarters and family home.

Festooned with swivelling security cameras, it also is watched over by an outer ring of leather-jacketed security men who juggle firearms and walkie-talkies as they prowl the pavement. A Hamas car collects select visitors from city hotels - by prior arrangement.

When discretion is needed, one of a fleet of heavy, black Mercedes-Benz sedans is wheeled out - black curtains are drawn behind the tinted glass.

When greater discretion is required, the driver jumps the car on to the pavement, easing to a halt under an outstretched awning that hangs from the perimeter wall. The house guards, moving with practised precision, then seize the loose ends of two bunched canvas flaps suspended from the awning and draw them quickly out to the edge of the pavement, enveloping the vehicle before some of Mishal's more mysterious callers dare to alight.

The arrival of an outsider is an emergency event for Mishal's suit-and-tied inner security ring. These men frequently speak into microphones concealed in the cuff of their jacket sleeve. Their thoroughness reveals an understanding that their boss is a constant target for a determined enemy.

Beyond an airport-like, walk-through security machine and up dog-legged stairs, a heavy, double-bolted door leads into a hallway, from which a visitor is escorted through a set of double doors into Mishal's diwan, or meeting place.

Armchairs line the long walls and the decor is various shades of Hamas green. But it is a wall of mostly gaunt faces that locks the attention of visitors upon entering; arranged in a honeycomb pattern, they are 20 Hamas leaders, fighters and bomb-makers, all victims of Israel's campaign of targeted assassination.

Holding forth expansively, the Hamas leader negotiates the tripwires of the diplomatic and political minefields that he inhabits daily, with certainty and a confidence that verges on bombast, as he lectures a fast-changing world on how it should respond to his movement - not the reverse.

Did he have any regrets about the extent of the damage Israeli forces inflicted on Gaza in December-January - about 1300 Palestinians dead, thousands injured and thousands of homes and other buildings damaged and destroyed? The assault came after Hamas refused to renegotiate a truce, on the grounds that Israel had consistently violated what Hamas understood to be the terms of the six-month ceasefire.

Reminded that the Hezbollah leader, Hassan Nasrallah, had publicly acknowledged that had he known the ferocity of the Israeli retaliation when it invaded Lebanon after the abduction of three Israeli soldiers in 2006, he would not have taken the soldiers, Mishal insists that Gaza and Hamas are different cases.

"The 2006 captures were an option, a choice for Hezbollah, so they are entitled to assess the validity of what they did in terms of the consequences for Lebanon," he says. "But for the Palestinians, Gaza wasn't a question of choice.

"Israel was supposed to end the siege and open the border crossings in return for a halt to the rockets; the rockets stopped, but the siege remained and the crossings stayed closed. It's unfair to ask Palestinians if they want to die slowly under siege or quickly under fire."

On Wednesday, Mishal's visitors include parliamentary delegations from Greece and Italy. They came from the British and European parliaments a few days before that. The MPs now come in a wave of publicity, but the trailblazers came earlier: analysts from American and European think tanks who decided the time had come to make discreet efforts to understand the Hamas mindset.

These are small, non-governmental delegations. But they are signs of different times for Hamas, of feelers being extended from corners of the world that until now have gone along with the US-led campaign to keep Hamas in a deep freeze.

And they are in marked contrast to the cold shoulder Israel is feeling around the world in the aftermath of its ferocious assault on Gaza, a chill that is billed in Israel as the country's worst diplomatic crisis in two decades.

As Israel increases the budget allocation for its global image-making program, Hamas is buoyed by confirmation from Britain that, notwithstanding consternation in Washington, it has eased its isolation of Hamas's counterpart in Lebanon, Hezbollah, by agreeing to talk to its political wing.

London said the move was justified because Hezbollah has joined a government of national unity. Given that national unity talks are on foot in the Occupied Territories, an argument is being formulated in Hamas that it should be granted the same dispensation by London.

France, too, has intimated a willingness to open dialogue with Hamas and a growing army of former

government officials and peace negotiators is urging that Hamas be given a seat at the table. Led by the former US president Jimmy Carter, who visited Mishal in Damascus, it includes the likes of the former British prime minister Tony Blair and the former Australian foreign affairs minister Gareth Evans.

Despite, or perhaps because of the carnage in Gaza, the mood in the Hamas bunker is upbeat; support for the Islamist movement among Palestinians rose dramatically after the January hostility, just as it fell for the US-backed Palestinian President, Mahmoud Abbas, and his feeble Fatah faction, whose writ is confined to the West Bank.

"More and more, the US and Israel and others in their camp understand that they cannot implement their agenda against us - because of the strength that we have acquired," Mishal says through an interpreter. "Netanyahu destroyed the peace process the last time he was prime minister and his plan now for Palestinians to have just economic independence will fail, too."

Pressed on what policy changes Hamas might make as a gesture to the new regional order demanded by Hamas, Mishal offers little, arguing: "Hamas has already changed - we accepted the national accords for a Palestinian state based on the 1967 borders and we took part in the 2006 Palestinian elections.

"But where is the response by Washington and the others? All we got was hostility and negativity [when we won the election]."

Mishal claims to be untroubled by the prospect of negative outcomes for Hamas as a result of Washington's efforts to reach out to Iran and Syria.

"We're not worried," he says. "Hamas is not a card in anyone's hand. We play an effective role, even in times of dramatic change. Nothing is going to happen in this region until the Palestinian issue is properly addressed - and many countries in the region, including Iran and Syria, hold a principled commitment to the Palestinian cause."

Much as he welcomes the election of Barack Obama, Mishal refuses to entertain rewriting Hamas' offensive charter, not only as a gesture to a new world order but also to deprive critics of the movement of one of their most potent targets.

In 2005, the movement had appointed a committee to review Hamas's controversial 1988 Charter - with its offensive language, its anti-Semitism, its incitement to battle and its calls for the elimination of the state of Israel. In a costly fit of pique over being consigned to the sin bin by the US and others after its election win, Hamas shelved the review.

Policy changes by Hamas have rendered much of the document redundant. But the continued inclusion of the call for the destruction of Israel has become a vulnerable attack point for Hamas' worldwide army of critics.

Revealing that the pique remains potent, Mishal says: "They didn't give us a chance after we won the election, irrespective of what we might have done."

Will the charter be rewritten?

"Not a chance. The message to us from the world was absolute rejection of the election outcome, because the result was not acceptable to the US and to corrupt elements of the Palestinian community [read Fatah].

"Our approach is not by means of changing the charter, a document written in 1988, but by virtue of our policy program today. Judge us by what we do today - not by what was written more than 20 years ago.

" Hamas has declared its acceptance of a Palestinian state in the occupied territories; we have joined the political process; we have entered short-term truces with Israel - this is the reality that the world needs to deal with. You say people use the charter as a weapon against us - well, let them."

Mishal refuses to accept Israeli claims that it was new demands by Hamas that forced the collapse this week of negotiations to exchange hundreds of Palestinian prisoners held by Israel for a single Israeli who was captured almost three years ago: Sergeant Gilad Shalit.

But asked about reports that Hamas wanted freedom for as many as 1400 prisoners, Mishal explains the calculus of the negotiations - from Hamas's perspective.

In the most celebrated exchanged in the past, three Israeli soldiers were swapped, in 1985, for 1150 Palestinians - almost 400 Palestinians for each Israeli.

Asked how Hamas now could demand more than three times that many Palestinians in return for Shalit's freedom, he says: "Israel's prisoner numbers were relatively low in '85 - 1150 would have been most of those they held."

"The number we are seeking for Shalit is only one-tenth of today's number of Palestinians in Israeli jails."

"The Israelis just don't learn. When they refuse to release Palestinians, it forces the Palestinians to resort to other means to gain their release - and inevitably this includes the capture of more Israeli soldiers."

In this week's interview in Damascus, Mishal recommitted Hamas to the electoral process in the Occupied Territories - despite an Israeli round-up and jailing of more than 30 of Hamas's West Bank MPs in the aftermath of the 2006 election.

This week, Israel rounded up 10 senior Hamas figures in the West Bank, including four MPs it described as "terror operatives" - reportedly in a bid to pressure Hamas to accept Israel's terms in the haggling over Shalit.

Underlying Mishal's analysis is Hamas's determination to avoid what it sees as the pitfalls, for the Palestinian side, of the years that followed the 1993 Oslo Accords.

Under the leadership of Yasser Arafat, the Fatah movement and the Palestine Liberation renounced violence as a weapon and recognised the state of Israel, but achieved little in endless rounds of so-called peace talks as Israel continued to carve up the Occupied Territories to suit its own needs. Since Arafat's death at the end of 2004, his successor Mahmoud Abbas has made no headway either.

Mishal lays out the pieces of the geopolitical puzzle and laughs. Despite Islam's prohibition on gambling, he concludes: "If the Palestinian people were gamblers, they would bet on Hamas."

Jerusalem Police set to prevent 'Palestinian Culture Festival'

Article Author(s): Jonathan Lis

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Source Link(s): <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1072679.html> ^[16]

Jerusalem Police announced on Friday they would prevent the so-called Palestinian Culture Festival the Palestinian Authority plans to organize in the city on Saturday.

The PA is planning to fly a glider plane painted in the colors of the Palestinian national flag over the walls of the Old City as part of the festival, which is meant to declare the city to be "the capital of Arabic culture for 2009."

The police said that they were determined to enforce the law, whereby any event organized and funded by the PA is prohibited within Jerusalem's municipal jurisdiction.

The head of the Legal Forum for the Land of Israel, Nachi Eyal, on Wednesday urged Public Security Minister Avi Dichter and Police Commissioner David Cohen to thwart the staging of the event.

"To the best of my understanding, this is an attempt to demonstrate Palestinian sovereignty in Jerusalem in an illegal manner," said Eyal.

"The law...obligates the Palestinian Authority to respect the sovereignty of Israel within the boundaries of the State of Israel, including East Jerusalem."

Since early Friday morning, large police forces, including Border Police, have arrived at the city and are slated to deploy to East Jerusalem and the surrounding Arab villages on Saturday.

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, meanwhile, is slated to kick off the celebrations from his headquarters in Ramallah. Events are also due to be held in Gaza, Lebanon, Nazareth and Bethlehem.

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