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No One Is Righteous

Akiva Eldar

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Tzipi Livni is absolutely correct when she says "Egypt's activity on the Philadelphi Route is dismal and problematic." The foreign minister told the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee the truth; these weapons do strengthen Hamas' grip, at the expense of the pragmatic elements in Gaza. It's too bad no one asked her why she thinks the Egyptian government, which she said plays a positive role in the peace process, is acting against its own interests. Why does Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, who chases down the Muslim Brotherhood to the point of its complete destruction, strengthen the group's radical sibling? Why does he anger Israel's friends and risk putting a crimp in American assistance?

Livni knows the answer. She knows the Egyptian political elite is even less interested in strengthening Hamas than she is. The foreign minister also knows that, in some countries, the policy dictated by the political elite does not always resemble the situation on the ground. Livni is well acquainted with the country in which "the military people are the ones who essentially influence the political decisions, not when they sit and make a political plan, but at the day-to-day, ongoing level," as she said in her testimony before the Winograd Committee investigating the Second Lebanon War.

"In the entire Palestinian issue, which certainly influences every political process on the day-to-day level," Livni testified, "the key is found with the army: whether you open crossings or not, transfer funds or not." In more intimate forums than a public committee, the foreign minister says explicitly that government directives to make daily Palestinian life easier in the West Bank disappear on the way from Jerusalem to Nablus. There is no better indication of this than the gap between Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's repeated promises to Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and U.S. President George W. Bush. While greater ease of movement of people and goods in the West Bank was promised, hundreds of roadblocks and mounds of dirt continue to embitter the lives of millions of Palestinians.

This is not a matter of a temporary weakening of discipline in the Israel Defense Forces. Prof. Shlomo Ben-Ami, who served as foreign minister in the Barak government, noted in the movie "A Million Bullets in October" that understandings were reached on a cease-fire, removal of roadblocks and the opening of roads at the Sharm el-Sheikh summit a short time after the intifada broke out. However, he said, "Each time we saw some kind of mold, some kind of behavior pattern of the IDF: There's an order that comes from the political arena and somewhere in the middle, these orders dissolve, disappear."

But there's no need for dramatic recordings to show that the laws of the jungle rule in the territory controlled by "the only democracy in the Middle East." It's all written down in official documents, in black and white.

For instance, Civil Administration data show that 3,449 files on illegal construction in settlements and outposts have been opened in the past decade, but only 3 percent of the buildings were demolished. The Sasson report on outposts states: "In many cases, the Civil Administration monitoring unit did not report the unauthorized construction of neighborhoods, expansions and outposts." The report also states that, "The defense minister's assistant, Colonel Ron Shechner (res.), approved moving caravans for placement in an illegal location, despite the positions of the defense minister and the Defense Ministry, thereby exceeding his authority." Most of the recommendations made in the Sasson report, which was submitted to the government in March 2005, are collecting dust in the Prime Minister's Office.

It's true Egyptian soldiers and officers are not bursting with excess motivation to disrupt what they see as the struggle of their Muslim brothers against the Jewish occupation. But Israeli officers also don't get awards for protecting the rights of Palestinians. Jewish soldiers don't go out of their way to protect Arabs from Jews (carrying army-issue weapons), whom they see as pioneers redeeming the land.

When it comes to the contradiction between being committed to the political process and rendering assistance to those trying to sabotage that process, the Israeli government shouldn't be so quick to throw stones.

In a country in which the army holds the key to changing reality in sensitive disputed areas that are central to political negotiations, it would be worth Livni's while to rein in her criticism of the neighbors. In this story, no one is righteous.

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