

The Virtue of Down to Earth Wisdom

Rabinowitz Danny

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The blood-soaked chaos that is gradually becoming a routine part of life in the territories and is also having an impact on life on the Israeli side of the pre-1967 borders must not be allowed to hide the logic that lies behind the recent violent events. In contrast to the media "spin" being offered by Prime Minister Ehud Barak and by Public Security and acting Foreign Minister Shlomo Ben-Ami, the Palestinian people did not undergo some mysterious, unexpected and inexplicable metamorphosis early last month. Never for one moment have the Palestinians abandoned their determination to live in dignity and peace in their own independent state alongside Israel. Their leaders have not suddenly come down with a severe case of megalomania and have not taken a decision to use light weapons for the express purpose of eradicating Israel - a medium-sized power - from the map simply because the phrasing at the recent Camp David summit was inadequate.

The red-hot Al Aqsa Intifada has completely different roots, ones that are far more clearly understandable. Essentially, this Intifada is a resolute, highly-focused attempt on the part of the Palestinians to reclaim all of the territory that was taken from them. They want that territory without any Jewish settlements and intend to create a viable independent state on it.

The Palestinians lost the West Bank after the Israeli War of Independence of 1948 (the Palestinians call that war their nakba or "catastrophe"). Immediately after the war, King Abdullah of Jordan - who, in a series of clandestine agreements with Zionist leaders before and during the war was given a foothold in East Jerusalem -

exploited the political vacuum that the war created on the West Bank and annexed the territory to his kingdom.

In the Gaza Strip, the dynamics were different, but the result was the same. Between 1948 and 1967, the Egyptians controlled the area, ruling the Gaza Strip's large, impoverished Palestinian population, in which the percentage of 1948 refugees exceeded that of the original residents.

In the wake of the Six-Day War of June 1967, the Jordanian and Egyptian administrations, on the West Bank and in the Gaza Strip respectively, were replaced by an Israeli occupation. Ever since the late 1960s, the Palestinians have conducted a political struggle that has, at times, been accompanied by guerrilla operations and civic rebellion aimed at regaining control of their own lands.

The Al Aqsa Intifada broke out after the political process, which had begun with the Madrid peace conference and had culminated in the recent Camp David summit, ran out of steam without bringing the Palestinians any tangible results. Perhaps Barak thought that the proposal he had formulated in collaboration with U.S. President Bill Clinton would constitute an unprecedented historical event, a momentous demonstration of magnanimity. Although he never revealed the nature of the proposal, Barak spoke about it with great enthusiasm and in a persuasive manner, giving the impression that this was a deal that the Palestinians, if they really wanted to further their own interests, should grab with both hands.

The mighty, incredible gush of energy that burst forth from the territories last month clearly demonstrates how wrong Barak was. Each passing day has further emphasized the immense distance between the Barak-Clinton proposal and the kind of formula with which the Palestinian people and its leaders could live.

All the oratory prowess and sophistication of Barak - an individual who is said to be incapable of understanding down-to-earth wisdom - will never succeed in twisting a basic, inalterable fact: The

Palestinians will not agree to declare an end to their century-old dispute with the Jews unless they first receive all of the territories, without any Jewish settlements, but perhaps with some minor border adjustments. This is the very crux of the present confrontation. The decision that the Israeli public has managed to avoid for more than 30 years is now backfiring among the present scene of flames and smoke, like a relentless boomerang.

The public debate over the future of the territories was silenced at a critical moment in the late 1960s and became highly problematic after the establishment of Jewish settlements in Hebron's Park Hotel and in Sabastiya. This debate became very complicated because of the support that every government - whether Labor or Likud - gave the Jewish settlements from that period until the present day. The debate is now stuck in the throat of the Israeli political system like a very sharp bone.

No Israeli government would ever dare to give the territories back to the Palestinians or to dismantle Jewish settlements. Nor would any Israeli government be prepared to openly admit that all the blood, suffering and hatred that the Middle East, including Israel, is on the point of experiencing is the price that must be paid for the continuation of the Israeli occupation and for Israel's stubborn determination to keep the settlements intact.

This a tragedy that is unfolding before our very eyes and in which we ourselves are protagonists. This is a tragedy that will determine, in the foreseeable future, the ugly, contorted shape of our lives and the lives of our neighbors.

The Palestinians are dreaming of a Kosovo-like scenario, in which a Kafr Kana-type mistake or a hasty operational decision could generate horrifying pictures in the wake of which television viewers in both Western and Arab countries would demand an immediate response. The feelings of abhorrence among the members of Western television audiences, combined with fears for the stability of Arab regimes

because of pro-Palestinian unrest, would, the Palestinians are hoping, serve as a catalyst for massive Western pressure that would force Israel to evacuate the territories and dismantle the settlements. Until that happens, there will be a gradual Lebanonization of the entire area, as the blood shed by Israel Defense Forces soldiers becomes an ever-mightier stream.

Israel's military strength is infinitely greater than that of the Palestinians. On the other hand, the Israelis have less stamina and solidarity. One reason is the tremendous Palestinian rage that has built up under the Israeli occupation; the other is the fact that when national liberation fronts, like the Palestine Liberation Organization, feel they are on the very verge of realizing their aspirations, they are capable of recruiting energies that older, more established nations have long since forgotten.

However, the principal point to be remembered here is that colonial nations only have periods of glory; they have no staying power. Israel's period of glory in the territories - to remind those who may have forgotten - began to crack when former prime minister Yitzhak Shamir attended the Madrid peace conference; it came to an end when Hebron was returned to the Palestinians by Benjamin Netanyahu, who was prime minister at the time.

In contrast, Israel's true staying power will be revealed if, in the wake of a meaningful agreement with the Palestinians, the pre-1967 borders of the country themselves are threatened