

## **Only one speaker left on the national screen**

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Intelligence flaws vanished in the politicians' warm hug for a version that fitted their heart's desire, silencing the instinct to skepticism, the life breath of any researcher.

Brigadier General Yossi Kuperwasser, head of the research division of Military Intelligence, made some statements to Haaretz (June 23) relevant to the recent debate about the Palestinians' real strategic intentions.

Kuperwasser, like his predecessor General Amos Gilad, believes the Palestinians want to establish a state over all of Palestine. Like Gilad, he believes that when Yasser Arafat understood he could not flood Israel with refugees, he set off the intifada to subdue it with terror.

By contrast, the head of MI and their former direct commander general Amos Malka, believes the Palestinians want a political settlement with Israel. He believes the intifada was a tactic, intended to squeeze more concessions from Israel.

This debate has long exceeded the framework of an anecdotal or ego war. It deals with a procedure by which Israel's governments determine their policy toward the Palestinians - a policy responsible among other things for four years in which thousands have been killed and immense suffering has been caused on both sides, as well as tens of billions of shekels of economic damage.

Assessing the intentions of "the other side" is difficult even when it is one person, certainly when it is an entire nation. After the intelligence failure on the eve of the Yom Kippur War a more pluralistic debating culture was formed in

the Israel Defense Forces and government.

Instead of one-intention assessment the intelligence community began presenting the policy makers with two or three assessments, while conducting an open debate on their relative weaknesses. Apparently this also happened with the eruption of the intifada in September 2000. MI Chief Amos Malka, presented an assessment saying the Palestinians wanted to reach an agreement. General Gilad thought they were heading for an eternal war of annihilation.

The government adopted Gilad's version and concealed Malka's. Gilad's star shone and he became the national assessor, the sober, rational officer who spent days and nights in general staff and cabinet meetings, airing his opinions in Knesset committee sessions, television studios and conferences. He, the politicians, the media and an overwhelming majority of the intellectual elite - including the left - enlisted to a mutual bolstering campaign.

They intensified the mantra "there is no partner and never has been." The chorus became louder and louder, until it ripened into the fiction of unilateral disengagement. This, it now transpires, has numerous partners - including the Palestinians. But the Gilad and Kuperwasser conception disintegrates not only in the face of reality.

It has inherent fallacies. These include reliable information that the eruption of hostilities in the territories had taken Arafat by surprise; the assumption that Arafat is so hallucinatory that he does not understand the limits of power opposite Israel; and ignoring the fact that politicians' public statements do not always constitute a serious basis for assessing long term intentions.

These flaws in the conception vanished under the politicians' warm hug for the general whose version fitted in with their heart's desire. The din of the choir silenced the instinct of skepticism, which is the breath of any researcher worthy of the name. On the national

screen there remained, like in 1973, one solitary speaker of exaggerated self importance, a captive of his illusion that Arafat had a clear vision that only he could apprehend and read.

The conclusion from all this is that pluralism at the decision stage is important, but not sufficient. It is important to conduct an open debate after a basic strategic decision is made, like the one made at the end of 2000, which saw the Palestinians as an eternal enemy with intentions of extermination.

Politicians who reach senior positions because of ideology and their success in creating an image of all-knowing consistency are no partners for creating such a debate culture. Only a responsible media and intellectuals who do not stop thinking independently when the ranks close at times of crisis - the kind of elite that has been scarce in Israel and the United States in recent years - can do that.