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“If Arafat were Alive…”

Sharon asked for permission to kill Arafat and Bush gave it to him, with the proviso that it must be done undetectably

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“IF ARAFAT were alive…” one hears this phrase increasingly often in conversations with Palestinians, and also with Israelis and foreigners.

“If Arafat were alive, what’s happening now in Gaza wouldn’t be happening…” – “If Arafat were alive, we would have somebody to talk with…” – “If Arafat were alive, Islamic fundamentalism would not have won among the Palestinians and would have lost some force in the neighboring countries!”

In the meantime, the unanswered questions come up again: How did Yasser Arafat die? Was he murdered? If so, who murdered him?

On the way back from Arafat’s funeral in 2004, I ran into Jamal Zahalka, a member of the Knesset. I asked him if he believed that Arafat was murdered. Zahalka, a doctor of pharmacology, answered “Yes!” without hesitation. That was my feeling, too. But a hunch is not proof. It is only a product of intuition, common sense and experience.

Recently we got a kind of confirmation. Just before he died, Uri Dan, who had been Ariel Sharon’s loyal mouthpiece for almost 50 years, published a book in France. It includes a report of a conversation Sharon told him about, with President (George W.) Bush. Sharon asked for permission to kill Arafat and Bush gave it to him, with the proviso that it must be done undetectably. When Dan asked Sharon whether it had been carried out, Sharon answered: “It’s better not to talk about that.” Dan took this as confirmation.

The secret services of many countries have poisons that are all but undetectable. The Mossad tried to kill Khaled Mashal, the Hamas leader, in broad daylight on a main Amman thoroughfare. He was saved only when the Israeli government was compelled to provide the antidote to the poison it had used. Viktor Yushchenko, the president of the Ukraine, was poisoned and saved only when the specific suspicious symptoms were identified by experts in time. Recently, a former Russian spy, Aleksander Litvinenko, was murdered by lethal polonium-210. And how many cases have gone undetected?

Is there proof that Arafat was murdered by Israeli or other agents? No, there is none. This week I again ran into MK Zahalka, and both of us concluded that the suspicion is growing stronger, together with the conviction that Arafat’s absence is felt now more than ever.

IF ARAFAT were alive, there would be a clear address for negotiations with the Palestinian people.

The claimed absence of such an address serves the Israeli government as the official pretext for its refusal to start peace negotiations. Every time Condoleezza Rice or another of Bush's parrots talks about the need to "restart the dialog" (don't mention "negotiations") for "the final status" or "the permanent settlement" (don't mention "peace"), that is the response of Tsipi Livni, Ehud Olmert & Co.

Dialog? With whom? No use to talk with Mahmoud Abbas, because he is unable to impose his will on the Palestinian people. He is no second Arafat. He has no power. And we couldn't possibly talk with the Hamas government, because it belongs to Bush's "axis of evil". So what do you want, Condi dear?

Tsipi Livni, Condi's new buddy, goes further: at the convocation of the billionaires' cabal in Davos she warned Abbas publicly not to strike a "compromise with terrorists". A timely warning. Desperate to create a credible Palestinian address, Abbas had just flown to Damascus to meet Mashal. Thus, by the way, he has admitted publicly that nothing can be done without the Hamas leader, who has become a kind of Palestinian super-president.

Livni recognized the danger at once and rushed to torpedo the mission. No dialog with a Palestinian unity government, much as there is no dialog with Abbas or Hamas. That Ok, Condi honey?

IF ONE wants to see real joy, one has only to look at the faces of Israeli correspondents who appear every evening on television to report on events in Lebanon.

What delight! The "Christians and Sunnis" attack Shiite students at the Arab University in Beirut and kill them! Any moment, a new civil war may break out! Look, a female Sunni student interviewed on television says that "Nasrallah is worse than Olmert!" Look at her again! And again! And again!

"When two quarrel, the third laughs," as the proverb goes. When an Arab hits an Arab – whether in Baghdad, Gaza or Beirut – the government of Israel and its commentators in the media are glowing. That has been a dominant theme in Israeli thought since the founding of the state, and even before: when Arabs are fighting each other, that is good for us.

In war, that makes sense. A split between your enemies is a gift to you. In World War I, the German general staff sent Lenin back to Russia in the famous sealed wagon, hoping to create a split between Russia and her British and French allies. In the 1948 war, we were saved because the armies of Egypt and Jordan were more interested in competing with each other than in fighting us. In the 80s, the Israeli army sent officers to North Iraq in order to help Mustafa Barzani to tear the Kurdish region away from Saddam's country.

That is a good strategy in war, which states have followed since the beginning of history. In this respect, Israel is no exception. The question is: is this also a good strategy when one wants to achieve peace?

IF – "IF" in capital letters – the government of Israel desired peace, it would adopt the opposite strategy.

In the 50s, when David Ben-Gurion did his utmost to promote splits between Egypt, Syria and Iraq, Nahum Goldman, the senior Zionist diplomat, opposed this. He argued that the many conflicts between Arab leaders were a danger to Israel, because every Arab leader tries to outdo his rivals in his hostility to Israel.

Nowadays that is more evident than ever. Bush and his henchmen and henchwomen are trying to set up a pro-American bloc consisting of Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Abbas and Siniora. On the opposite side there is the "axis of evil" consisting of Iran, Syria, Hizbullah and Hamas.

The leaders of Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia are paying lip service to the Palestinian cause, but are quite ready to sell it out in return for suitably lavish American aid. The Israeli government is honored to find itself in the company of the three eminent democrats – President Husni Mubarak and the two Kings Abdallah.

But is this good for Israel? It is good for the continuation of the war against the Palestinians, for annexation and the building of settlements. It is not good for the termination of the historic conflict with the Palestinians, the ending of the occupation and the laying down of arms.

There is no chance of making peace with Mahmoud Abbas, nor would it have any value, without the full support of Hamas. But even a Fatah-Hamas partnership would not be broad enough to ensure a peaceful future for Israel. It would need the support of the whole Arab world.

There lies the immense importance of the "Arab Peace Initiative", the Arab League proposal that was adopted by the 2002 Beirut summit conference. Only a united Palestinian leadership, which enjoys the backing of the entire Arab world, can carry out such a revolutionary historic undertaking. Not only should we not object to it, but we should in fact demand it.

The terms of the Arab initiative are the same as those already set out by Yasser Arafat in the 70s: a Palestinian state side by side with Israel, whose border is the Green Line and whose capital is East Jerusalem; the dismantling of the settlements; an "agreed upon" solution of the refugee problem. Unofficially Arafat agreed to swaps of territory that would enable some of the settlements located near the Green Line to remain in place. There is practically no Palestinian, and indeed no Arab, who would agree to less. It would leave the Palestinians a mere 22% of historic Palestine.

This can be achieved, provided the Palestinian people are united and the Arab world is united. That means the agreement of Syria, Hizbullah, Hamas and also Iran, which is of course not Arab.

Therefore, if one wants peace, one will not rejoice in face of the bloodshed in Gaza and the Lebanon. We have nothing to laugh about when Arab hits Arab. Woe to such laughter.

And, of course, if Arafat were alive, everything would be much, much easier.

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