

How Many Divisions?

Uri Avnery 10/01/09

NEARLY SEVENTY YEARS ago, in the course of World War II, a heinous crime was committed in the city of Leningrad. For more than a thousand days, a gang of extremists called "the Red Army" held the millions of the town's inhabitants hostage and provoked retaliation from the German Wehrmacht from inside the population centers. The Germans had no alternative but to bomb and shell the population and to impose a total blockade, which caused the death of hundreds of thousands.

Some time before that, a similar crime was committed in England. The Churchill gang hid among the population of London, misusing the millions of citizens as a human shield. The Germans were compelled to send their Luftwaffe and reluctantly reduce the city to ruins. They called it the Blitz.

This is the description that would now appear in the history books – if the Germans had won the war.

Absurd? No more than the daily descriptions in our media, which are being repeated ad nauseam: the Hamas terrorists use the inhabitants of Gaza as "hostages" and exploit the women and children as "human shields", they leave us no alternative but to carry out massive bombardments, in which, to our deep sorrow, thousands of women, children and unarmed men are killed and injured.

IN THIS WAR, as in any modern war, propaganda plays a major role. The disparity between the forces, between the Israeli army - with its airplanes, gunships, drones, warships, artillery and tanks - and the few thousand lightly armed Hamas fighters, is one to a thousand, perhaps one to a million. In the political arena the gap between them is even wider. But in the propaganda war, the gap is almost infinite.

Almost all the Western media initially repeated the official Israeli propaganda line. They almost entirely ignored the Palestinian side of the story, not to mention the daily demonstrations of the Israeli peace camp. The rationale of the Israeli government ("The state must defend its citizens against the Qassam rockets") has been accepted as the whole truth. The view from the other side, that the Qassams are a retaliation for the siege that starves the one and a half million inhabitants of the Gaza Strip, was not mentioned at all.

Only when the horrible scenes from Gaza started to appear on Western TV screens, did world public opinion gradually begin to change.

True, Western and Israeli TV channels showed only a tiny fraction of the dreadful events that appear 24 hours every day on Aljazeera's Arabic channel, but one picture of a dead baby in the arms of its terrified father is more powerful than a thousand elegantly constructed sentences from the Israeli army spokesman. And that is what is decisive, in the end.

War – every war – is the realm of lies. Whether called propaganda or psychological warfare, everybody accepts that it is right to lie for one's country. Anyone who speaks the truth runs the risk of being branded a traitor.

The trouble is that propaganda is most convincing for the propagandist himself. And after you convince yourself that a lie is the truth and falsification reality, you can no longer make rational decisions.

An example of this process surrounds the most shocking atrocity of this war so far: the shelling of the UN Fakhura school in Jabaliya refugee camp.

Immediately after the incident became known throughout the world, the army "revealed" that Hamas fighters had been firing mortars from near the school entrance. As proof they released an aerial photo which indeed showed the school and the mortar. But within a short time the official army liar had to admit that the photo was more than a year old. In brief: a falsification.

Later the official liar claimed that “our soldiers were shot at from inside the school”. Barely a day passed before the army had to admit to UN personnel that that was a lie, too. Nobody had shot from inside the school, no Hamas fighters were inside the school, which was full of terrified refugees.

But the admission made hardly any difference anymore. By that time, the Israeli public was completely convinced that “they shot from inside the school”, and TV announcers stated this as a simple fact.

So it went with the other atrocities. Every baby metamorphosed, in the act of dying, into a Hamas terrorist. Every bombed mosque instantly became a Hamas base, every apartment building an arms cache, every school a terror command post, every civilian government building a “symbol of Hamas rule”. Thus the Israeli army retained its purity as the “most moral army in the world”.

THE TRUTH is that the atrocities are a direct result of the war plan. This reflects the personality of Ehud Barak – a man whose way of thinking and actions are clear evidence of what is called “moral insanity”, a sociopathic disorder.

The real aim (apart from gaining seats in the coming elections) is to terminate the rule of Hamas in the Gaza Strip. In the imagination of the planners, Hamas is an invader which has gained control of a foreign country. The reality is, of course, entirely different.

The Hamas movement won the majority of the votes in the eminently democratic elections that took place in the West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip. It won because the Palestinians had come to the conclusion that Fatah’s peaceful approach had gained precisely nothing from Israel - neither a freeze of the settlements, nor release of the prisoners, nor any significant steps toward ending the occupation and creating the Palestinian state. Hamas is deeply rooted in the population – not only as a resistance movement fighting the foreign occupier, like the Irgun and the Stern Group in the past – but also as a political and religious body that provides social, educational and medical services.

From the point of view of the population, the Hamas fighters are not a foreign body, but the sons of every family in the Strip and the other Palestinian regions. They do not “hide behind the population”, the population views them as their only defenders.

Therefore, the whole operation is based on erroneous assumptions. Turning life into living hell does not cause the population to rise up against Hamas, but on the contrary, it unites behind Hamas and reinforces its determination not to surrender. The population of Leningrad did not rise up against Stalin, any more than the Londoners rose up against Churchill.

He who gives the order for such a war with such methods in a densely populated area knows that it will cause dreadful slaughter of civilians. Apparently that did not touch him. Or he believed that “they will change their ways” and “it will sear their consciousness”, so that in future they will not dare to resist Israel.

A top priority for the planners was the need to minimize casualties among the soldiers, knowing that the mood of a large part of the pro-war public would change if reports of such casualties came in. That is what happened in Lebanon Wars I and II.

This consideration played an especially important role because the entire war is a part of the election campaign. Ehud Barak, who gained in the polls in the first days of the war, knew that his ratings would collapse if pictures of dead soldiers filled the TV screens.

Therefore, a new doctrine was applied: to avoid losses among our soldiers by the total destruction of everything in their path. The planners were not only ready to kill 80 Palestinians to save one Israeli soldier, as has happened, but also 800. The avoidance of casualties on our side is the overriding commandment, which is causing record numbers of civilian casualties on the other side.

That means the conscious choice of an especially cruel kind of warfare – and that has been its Achilles heel.

A person without imagination, like Barak (his election slogan: "Not a Nice Guy, but a Leader") cannot imagine how decent people around the world react to actions like the killing of whole extended families, the destruction of houses over the heads of their inhabitants, the rows of boys and girls in white shrouds ready for burial, the reports about people bleeding to death over days because ambulances are not allowed to reach them, the killing of doctors and medics on their way to save lives, the killing of UN drivers bringing in food. The pictures of the hospitals, with the dead, the dying and the injured lying together on the floor for lack of space, have shocked the world. No argument has any force next to an image of a wounded little girl lying on the floor, twisting with pain and crying out: "Mama! Mama!"

The planners thought that they could stop the world from seeing these images by forcibly preventing press coverage. The Israeli journalists, to their shame, agreed to be satisfied with the reports and photos provided by the Army Spokesman, as if they were authentic news, while they themselves remained miles away from the events. Foreign journalists were not allowed in either, until they protested and were taken for quick tours in selected and supervised groups. But in a modern war, such a sterile manufactured view cannot completely exclude all others – the cameras are inside the strip, in the middle of the hell, and cannot be controlled. Aljazeera broadcasts the pictures around the clock and reaches every home.

THE BATTLE for the TV screen is one of the decisive battles of the war.

Hundreds of millions of Arabs from Mauritania to Iraq, more than a billion Muslims from Nigeria to Indonesia see the pictures and are horrified. This has a strong impact on the war. Many of the viewers see the rulers of Egypt, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority as collaborators with Israel in carrying out these atrocities against their Palestinian brothers.

The security services of the Arab regimes are registering a dangerous ferment among the peoples. Hosny Mubarak, the most exposed Arab leader because of his closing of the Rafah crossing in the face of terrified refugees, started to pressure the decision-makers in Washington, who until that time had blocked all calls for a cease-fire. These began to understand the menace to vital American interests in the Arab world and suddenly changed their attitude – causing consternation among the complacent Israeli diplomats.

People with moral insanity cannot really understand the motives of normal people and must guess their reactions. "How many divisions has the Pope?" Stalin sneered. "How many divisions have people of conscience?" Ehud Barak may well be asking.

As it turns out, they do have some. Not numerous. Not very quick to react. Not very strong and organized. But at a certain moment, when the atrocities overflow and masses of protesters come together, that can decide a war.

THE FAILURE to grasp the nature of Hamas has caused a failure to grasp the predictable results. Not only is Israel unable to win the war, Hamas cannot lose it.

Even if the Israeli army were to succeed in killing every Hamas fighter to the last man, even then Hamas would win. The Hamas fighters would be seen as the paragons of the Arab nation, the heroes of the Palestinian people, models for emulation by every youngster in the Arab world. The West Bank would fall into the hands of Hamas like a ripe fruit, Fatah would drown in a sea of contempt, the Arab regimes would be threatened with collapse.

If the war ends with Hamas still standing, bloodied but unvanquished, in face of the mighty Israeli military machine, it will look like a fantastic victory, a victory of mind over matter.

What will be seared into the consciousness of the world will be the image of Israel as a blood-stained monster, ready at any moment to commit war crimes and not prepared to abide by any moral restraints. This will have severe consequences for our long-term future, our standing in the world, our chance of achieving peace and quiet.

In the end, this war is a crime against ourselves too, a crime against the State of Israel.

<http://zope.gush-shalom.org/home/en/channels/avnery/1231625457/>