

A time of danger

By Adam Keller, Tel Aviv,
10 March 1996

IT IS hard to imagine how much havoc could be caused by a few determined and completely irresponsible fanatics, in such a short time.

Saturday, February 24 — precisely two weeks ago — was a clear and sunny weekday, also on the political scene. The Israeli general elections had been definitely set for May 29. In all opinion polls, Prime Minister Shimon Peres kept a strong and steady lead over Likud leader Binyamin Netanyahu and his victory seemed a foregone conclusion; a power struggle was developing inside the Likud, with many leading members believing that Netanyahu should be replaced by a candidate with a greater chance of success. Israeli-Palestinian relations seemed moving smoothly along, following Yasser Arafat's success in the Palestinian elections. The way seemed clear to further stages: revocation of the Palestinian Covenant, outdated symbol of Palestinian intransigence; Israeli withdrawal from Hebron, the only major West Bank city still under occupation; the beginning of negotiations on the final status... In the meantime, the young Israeli singer Zehava Ben performed before a Palestinian audience in Jericho and got wild applause, and prospects for the future seemed bright.

Under the calm surface, however, a fuse was burning — lit with the assassination of senior Hamas member Yihya Ayash by Israeli undercover agents at Gaza on January 5. The Israeli security service needed such a coup as the killing of Ayash — who had been involved in the blowing up of several Israeli buses — in order to compensate for its failure in guarding the life of Prime Minister Rabin. But in giving them the go-ahead to kill Ayash, Rabin's successor Shimon Peres made one of the worst blunders of his long career. The Ayash assassination shattered the *de facto* ceasefire which Hamas had maintained since August 1995. It tipped the balance inside Hamas against the relatively pragmatic internal leadership, which aims to become a political party and which conducted an intricate series of negotiations with Arafat in order to take an active role in building up the new Palestinian political system. In the aftermath of the killing of Ayash — foul arch-murderer in Israeli eyes, hero and martyr to many Palestinians — the lead among the radical Muslim was seized by the exiled leadership, which is based in Sudan and Syria and which seeks to continue at all costs and by all means the struggle against Israel.

Arafat tried — and for some time seemed to succeed — in stemming the tide, holding extensive negotiations with the Hamas lead-

ership to stop them from taking revenge against Israel which he knew would entail an Israeli crackdown greatly damaging to all Palestinians. But, as we now know, a group of Hamas militants — with or without the leadership's official sanction — was already preparing for the series of suicide attacks which were to shake Israel and the entire region. January 25 — second anniversary of the massacre perpetrated in Hebron by the fanatic settler Baruch Goldstein — was the date selected by Goldstein's Palestinian equivalents.

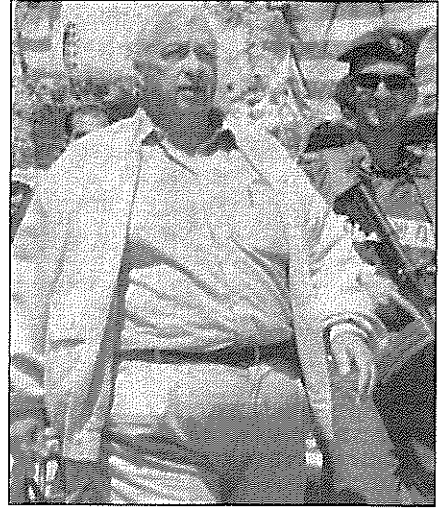
On the morning of January 25 I got up full of energy. There were many plans to carry through in the coming week. The campaign for the Palestinian women prisoners seemed to pick up much momentum and media attention, and in the city of Hebron peace activists had recently held a successful demonstration against the settlers in co-operation with the local Palestinians — an action to which a follow-up seemed indicated. Switching on the radio, I realised at once that all these plans — and much else — had been rendered moot.

A suicide bomber had blown himself up, and a bus-full of Israeli passengers, in the heart of Jerusalem. The radio estimates of the death toll rose steadily, as rescue teams combed through the burned-out wreckage. The emergency TV broadcasts showed the kind of horror scenes familiar from last year's Hamas bombing campaign, which we had begun to hope would not be seen again in Israel; and in the background of the picture we could see the right-wing mobs already beginning to form, as always on such days, with their shrill cries "Death to the Arabs" and "Down with Peres".

During the week of mourning for Rabin, in November 1995, peace activists from different groups had discussed the possibility that such a day would come again — and resolved that if it does we would not leave the right-wing in possession of the streets, that we would come out and demonstrate whatever happens. Yet now that the moment had indeed come, I felt again the kind of hesitation and paralysis I had felt at such moments in the past, and I heard the same also in the voices of others I phoned. It was not just the fear of being physically assaulted if we went out on the street with peace signs, but also the simple difficulty of answering the questions which would be certain to be asked by some bypassers: "You said that Oslo would lead to peace. Is this peace?"

At noon, the radio announced that a group of bereaved families who lost their dear ones in terrorist attacks had met with Prime Minister Peres — to encourage him to continue with the peace process.

Religious peace activist Yitzchak Frankenthal, speaking for the group, told the radio, "My son Arik, who was kidnapped and killed



One of Likud's leading lights, Ariel Sharon, takes a tour of the West Bank

by Hamas, believed in peace. He knew that terrorism is blind and that anybody could become its victim, and he believed that reaching real peace with our neighbours is the only way terrorism can truly be overcome. He would have wanted me to come here and talk to the Prime Minister the way I did."

After that, it was more easy to start organising, to discuss in hasty telephone consultations tactics and scenarios, the expected behaviour of the right-wing, of the police, of ordinary bypassers. It was decided not to go to the site of the bus explosion itself; rather, the evening vigil was scheduled to take place at Paris Square in central Jerusalem, the old rallying place of the Women in Black recently taken over by weekly Peace Now vigils. It was decided to have a single slogan — "Yes to Peace — No to Violence", the same as at the November 1995 rally at whose conclusion Rabin was assassinated. At 7.30pm we gathered at the spot — a large contingent of Peace Now youths, with a group of Labour students from Hebrew University and several Gush Shalom activists. We came with more than a little trepidation; the signs were all made of tough plastic, to prevent hostile crowds from snatching them and tearing them up. The police, too, were quite nervous, to judge from the numbers in which they arrived. Yet, surprisingly enough, bypasser response was no more hostile than in normal times, and in more than one case was positively supportive. The hour-long vigil ended with the lighting of candles and the singing of sad songs of mourning — both reminiscent of the days following the Rabin murder.

Polls taken in the following days indicated — as could have been expected — that Peres lost most of his lead. He now seemed to run almost neck-and-neck with Netanyahu — who had gotten some credit for behaving calm and "statesman like" and disassociating

himself from the violent mobs. Meanwhile, the government took the almost automatic step of imposing a closure on the Palestinian territories, supposedly in order to prevent the entry of further bombers, and incidentally depriving thousands of workers of their livelihood. For its part, the Hamas leadership released a statement calling for a ceasefire with Israel, and setting March 8 as a deadline for Israeli response, until which date no further action would be taken. The offer was officially rejected by the Peres government — yet it was taken quite seriously by several mainstream politicians and commentators, who discussed at length the pros and cons. On March 1, several of us from Gush Shalom had an unexpected chance to meet with a senior Hamas leader at the West Bank village of Bila'in — where we had come in order to participate in a rally against land confiscations. The man, Sheikh Hasan Yusef, was clearly in favour of a ceasefire.

However, the band of bombers seemed bent on discrediting their own movement's leadership and proving its deadlines to be meaningless — as well as defying the Israeli and Palestinian authorities and showing that, in spite of the closure and of all security precautions, they could strike again, on the same hour of the same day of the week, in the same Jerusalem bus line. (It was Line 18, serving mainly the most impoverished of the Jerusalem slums.) Once again, at nearly the same place on Jerusalem's main street as on the previous week, a full passenger bus was blown up by a suicide bomber.

Seeing the same horrors re-enacted exactly one week later gave a feeling of unreality, of living in a nightmare. One detail was different: we could clearly see that this time, the right-wingers were more numerous and more violent than in the previous week. Again there were the frantic consultations between different peace groups, the hasty telephone mobilisation. In the afternoon we gathered at the Rabin Square in Tel-Aviv, trying to draw strength from the memory of the Martyr of Peace. It was a heterogeneous group, combining secularist Jews with a group of religious students led by the maverick settler Rabbi Menachem Froman, as well as Palestinians and visitors from Morocco and Tunisia who came for a conference of the Tel-Aviv Center for Peace; we all lit candles, and several kinds of mourning services were held simultaneously.

On the afternoon of the following day I was seated at my word processor, when the radio announced yet another suicide bombing attack — this time outside the Dizengoff Shopping Centre, in the heart of Tel-Aviv. This time, the news hit me quite personally; my mother, an organiser in "Women for Political Prisoners" is in the habit of passing that precise spot on her way to the group's tiny office.

Phoning was of no avail; too many people had dear ones to worry about at or near the Dizengoff Center, one of the most crowded spots in Israel, and the telephone system simply collapsed under the sudden enormous overload. It was a terrible bus ride to central Tel-Aviv, with the bus radio blaring detailed descriptions of headless corpses

A Palestinian state now!

The following Gush Shalom statement was published as a paid advert in Ha'aretz, on 8 March 1996.

AT A time of blood and tears, fury and agony, the voice of common sense must be clearly heard.

Suicide terrorism has severely damaged the peace process. It has exposed the basic flaw of the Oslo Agreement: a protracted, five-year long interim period. This prolonged period — with all the complicated intermediate stages, each of which needs to be separately negotiated upon — constitutes a standing invitation to all opponents of peace, all fanatics and madmen on both sides, to perpetrate horrors in order to sabotage and stop the process.

The Oslo timetable gave ample time and opportunity to the Hamas suicide bombers on the Palestinian side as well as to Baruch Goldstein, Yigal Amir and their ilk among the Israelis; all of them were able to organise and do their worst, again and again.

There is a clear conclusion to be drawn from the recent terrorist rampage in the streets of Israel's cities: this dangerous time gap must be closed. The original Oslo timetable, by which negotiations on the definite agreement between Israelis and Palestinians should drag on leisurely until May 1999, is now clearly revealed to be an unaffordable luxury. During these three years, innumerable assaults could be launched by the adherents of "Greater Palestine" and "Greater Israel" alike, causing further untold death and suffering and quite possibly derailing the entire process.

Crossing an abyss should be done in one jump, not in two; this was said by Shimon Peres, then Foreign Minister, immediately after the original Oslo Agreement was signed. He has now been proven even more right than he knew. In face of what we experienced this week, we must accelerate the timetable and reach the definite agreement — not in years, but in months, and as few months as possible.

Such a time frame should suffice: the outline of an agreement is already clearly discernible, and the majority among both peoples — cutting across old prejudices and traditional party affiliations — is coming closer and

closer to accepting it. Such an arrangement would:

- Give official recognition to the state of Palestine, which has in fact already been established and which already possesses a democratically-elected parliament, president and government.

- Make the "Green Line", the border which existed before 1967, into the official international border between the two states. The Palestinian government would be made fully responsible for preventing any terrorist act originating from its territory — and at the same time, would gain the full sovereignty and authority which are indispensable for that task.

- Evacuate the Israeli forces with the greatest possible speed from all territories still under their occupation, and deploy them along the old-new border.

- Reach a reasonable compromise in Jerusalem, acceptable to both peoples.

- Give Israeli settlers the choice between staying in place under Palestinian rule or returning to Israel and getting compensation.

Now, more than ever, it is clear that hesitation and indecision give the enemies of peace their chance.

Curfews, closures, house demolitions, deportations, mass detentions — the old methods of oppression now once again implemented or contemplated by the Israeli military and political authorities — have all been tried many times in the past, and have all failed; indeed, all of them proved, again and again, to have the result of fanning higher the fire of hatred and conflict. The only feasible solution is to go to the definite solution — now!

- Gush Shalom, the Israeli peace bloc: PO Box 3322, Tel Aviv 61033, Israel. Tel. 972-3-5221732, fax 972-3-5271108



strewn about the ruined shops. At last I found my mother safe and sound — she had missed the bomber by a couple of minutes. Only then did I have to time to think of the catastrophic political consequences. On that night the cabinet — holding an emergency meeting in an atmosphere of panic magnified by the exaggerated media coverage of the shouting mobs — could have decided upon any wild measure and passed it with public acclaim. Some ministers actually proposed reconquering all the towns recently handed over to the Palestinians — which would have meant a total confrontation with the Palestinians and a bloodbath of staggering proportions; there were rumours of an internal Labor Party coup, forcing Peres to hand the defence portfolio to the hawkish Ehud Barak, and a more grandiose design to bring Likud into the government and give the defence ministry to the notorious Ariel Sharon; detailed plans were floated for a new mass deportation of Hamas leaders, on the lines of the disastrous December 1992 deportation.

The cabinet's actual decisions were draconian enough: a virtual siege of the Palestinian self-governing territories, effectively cutting the West Bank into a series of isolated enclaves; an effective brutal reconquest of the West Bank villages, left in the Oslo-2 agreement as an ambiguous no-man's land between Israeli and Palestinian jurisdictions; and a campaign of house demolitions and arrests of the suicide bombers' family members, for the sole crime of being their family members. Yet Peres kept his head enough not to take any irrevocable step, not to do something which would demolish the entire shaky structure of Oslo. In the conditions of that wild and desperate night, that was far from little.

Some other people also kept their head that night — a group of activists who gathered in front of Peres' home in North Tel-Aviv to protect it from the mobs and urge the Prime Minister to preserve what was left of the peace process. Seeing them on the TV screen at a late night hour was like finding an oasis in a scorching desert.

In the following days, something happened which nobody would have believed possible — this oasis of dedication to peace showed enormous vitality, rapidly spreading in all directions. The spate of right-wing violence died out within twenty-four hours of the Tel-Aviv bombing, leaving behind nothing but a trail of racist graffiti scrawled on the walls of the ruined shopping centre, in a grotesque imitation of "the Rabin graffiti" sprayed last November by mourning youths. Instead, an increasing number of peace demonstrators, organised by a variety of groups from the centre to the left of the political spectrum, took to the streets of Tel-Aviv and Jerusalem. With growing confidence, people took to the streets to express their determination not to let the chance for peace be snatched away. "We will not let Hamas blow up our peace" was an especially popular slogan.

There was also an enormous mobilisation by Israel's Arab citizens, with "Yes to Peace — No to Terrorism" demonstrations and vig-



Clashes on the West Bank after crackdown on Islamic militants

ils taking place at practically every significant Arab town in Israel and at many of the smaller villages, supported by all parts of the Arab political spectrum. On the other side of the border, there were for the first time big peace rallies in the Gaza and at several of the West Bank cities, in spite of their difficult situation, under revulsion against the suicide bombers at the Palestine grassroots — though it remains to be seen whether that would deter the bombers now seen to be a small fanatic breakaway group, oblivious even to the Hamas' political leadership.

The weekend of March 8 and 9 saw an enormous number of demonstrations in Tel-Aviv: a three-hour vigil by hundreds of Labourites outside the defence ministry, where the inner cabinet met for a special session, was greeted by passing drivers honking in approval; a rally at the Rabin Square was attended by thousands, at the call of former Mayor Shlomo Lahat and his group of (former) "Generals for Peace"; a Meretz Youth vigil at the site of the bombing itself in the Dizengoff Center; an enormous rally outside of the bombing itself in the Dizengoff Center; an enormous rally outside the private home of Shimon Peres, in which the arriving Prime Minister, given a hero's welcome by thousands of cheering supporters, to his bodyguards' great chagrin, plunged into the mass, ignoring the stringent security measures instituted since the Rabin murder.

On the following day, some 5,000 participated in a Peace Now march in the heart of Jerusalem — an impressive scene full of placards and lighted torches.

For the more radical of us, as to all others, this incredible upsurge was a heady and heartening experience — but with a reservation. The mobilisation around Peres and against the right-wing onslaught left little space for confronting Peres from the other direction. Only a few isolated placards in the demonstrations took up the collective punishments and gross human rights violations in the Palestinian territories — territories which the army's brutal actions in the past few days have shown to be still very much under occupation.

Now that Peres has shown himself able to survive the right-wing onslaught and still run neck-and-neck in the electoral race with Netanyahu, it is time to take again more distance from him, in the cause of Palestinian

human rights — which also has much to do with the chances of peace. This evening's TV news gave prominent coverage to the visit of Uri Avnery to Yasser Arafat in Gaza, and to their joint protest over the tightening siege which reduces the area to the point of starvation. Meanwhile, preparations are going ahead for the bombastic "Conference against Terrorism", to be held at the Egyptian resort of Sharm a-Sheikh, featuring President Clinton and a record number of world leaders — and which will hopefully do something to get the peace process out of the lurch, as well as ease the Palestinians' plight.

For the slightly longer range, the crisis had shown a deepening of a tendency already discernible among the Israeli population, transcending traditional political differences: the tendency towards "a separation between the two peoples". More and more people — even long-time Likud and right-wing supporters — have come to accept that this means an independent Palestinian state. Increasingly, such people are willing to accept even that this Palestinian state would include the Arab neighbourhoods of Jerusalem — hitherto the heresy of heresies. All this, however, is on condition that the borders remain closed, that no Palestinian will come to Israel; all Palestinians are now regarded with suspicion, as potential bombers. Israel is at present the only developed industrialised country in the world to actively welcome Third World migrant workers in large numbers — for the express purpose of replacing the Palestinian workers hitherto employed in Israel. (The inevitable social and political problems resulting from this immigration wave will undoubtedly be deeply felt in the next decade — by which time the character of Israeli society will have been irreversibly changed.)

The peace which seems to be taking shape will be a cold and harsh thing, a far cry from the open symbiosis and open borders which we always dreamed about. Yet it will provide an end to violence and a time for both peoples to heal their wounds. It may soften in time. ■

● This article is due to be published — possibly in an updated form — in the March/April issue of *The Other Israel* Magazine, available from PO Box 2542, Holon 58125, Israel.