

[Sacred Cows] Chapter 78. “The foreign agent who infiltrated Aman and warned of Hamas' intentions.” A conversation with Mati Steinberg, the Shabak advisor on Palestinian affairs, who was fired for predicting the catastrophes to come.

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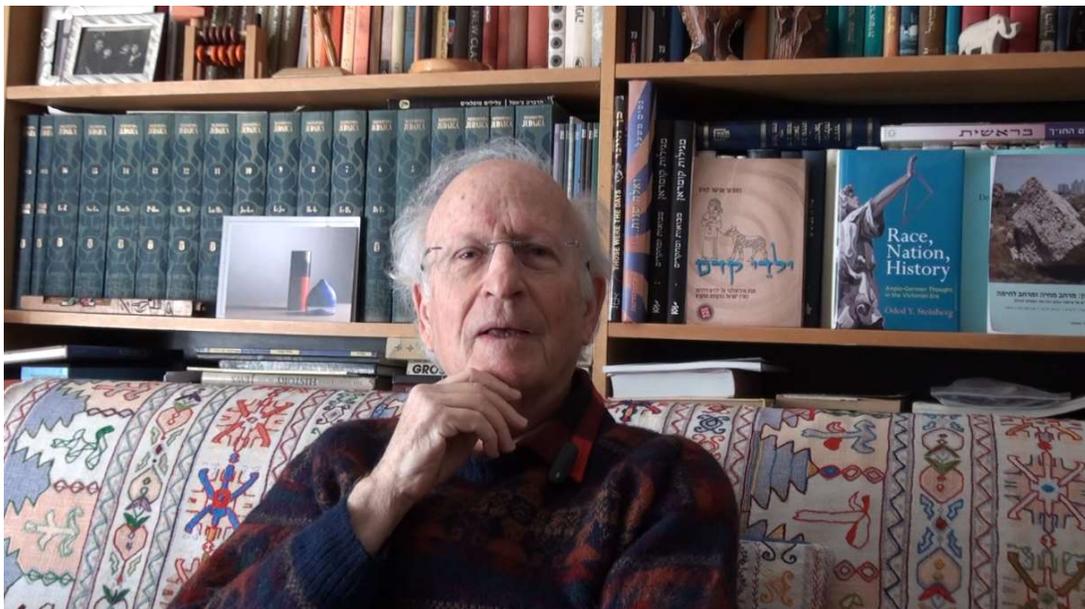
*Aman is the acronym for the military intelligence division within the IDF (Agaf Modi'in)

* Shabak, the Israel Security Agency, is the acronym for General Security Service, Sherut Bitachon Klali, a.k.a. Shin Bet.)

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Mati Steinberg, photo Yizhar Be'er

Matityahu Steinberg might be the only Israeli expert who reads every single word in the Palestinian resistance discourse and knows also how to analyze it in its broader context. The paradox is that the Israeli security service ejected him because of his warnings, which nearly all materialized, repeatedly. During our conversation, Steinberg describes how Netanyahu marked him as a ‘foreign agent’ who applied his views to the Palestinian issue. He explains

the internal failure of the intelligence community, that does not allow analysts to truly understand the other side and argues that, to his horror, the plan for a comprehensive war (against Israel) that will "change the region" was publicized a few weeks before the attack on the Gaza Envelop (October 7, 2023) but it is doubtful whether anyone in Israel has paid any attention to it, except for him.

Hamas, Steinberg adds, cleverly exploits the asymmetry in the balance of powers against the IDF and turns it to its advantage. Hamas, in effect, desires an excessive response from Israel. Therefore, Steinberg warns against leaving IDF forces in Gaza, which could lead to a quagmire that would turn Gaza into a *wahhel* (a deep-sinking swamp) and will draw the global Islamic terror into it.

Hamas' greatest enemy is not the IDF. Hamas' greatest enemy is a political settlement. If the Israeli government, which so far has been trying to avoid a decision, takes that step, Hamas will dry up, Steinberg predicts.

Watch/listen, read, judge, and share!

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Dr. Mati Steinberg, Shalom.

Steinberg: Shalom.

Were you surprised by the attack on October 7?

Steinberg: I believe I can prove that I was not, because I have been writing about it for years, even before the foolish misconception associated with Netanyahu was introduced. I understood long ago that by not advancing a political solution to the Palestinian problem, we are in effect doing the work of Hamas. It was clear to me that we were actively contributing to the strengthening and relative stability of Hamas, beginning with the unilateral withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, a gratuitous withdrawal from Gaza without reciprocity.

Are you referring to Ariel Sharon's Disengagement Plan of 2005, which amounted to essentially closing the gates of Gaza and throwing away the keys into a thorn bush? Do

you mean to say that what the Palestinian public said– that Hamas proved that Israel understands only force – is true?

Steinberg: That's correct, and I brought it all up. Although I did resign in 2003...

Do you mean that you resigned from advising the Shabak?

Steinberg: Yes. I resigned from advising the Shabak due to fundamental ideological disagreements at the peak of the Second Intifada because I opposed the automatic targeted assassinations, which were conducted without consideration of the strategic aspects but focused solely on the operational aspects.

From the moment I understood that Sharon decided on withdrawal, not that I opposed it, heaven forbid, in the context of a settlement, but I opposed a one-sided withdrawal, which demonstrated to the Palestinian public that force paid off, and that pragmatism did not pay off. It also sent the Arab Peace Initiative from 2002 – which became a source of authority along with U.N. Resolution 242 – to the trash bin. And I understood that the upcoming elections (to the Palestinian Legislative Council Y.B.) at the beginning of 2006 would pave Hamas' path to victory.

We will come back to this, but let's address for a moment the issue of targeted assassinations that you mentioned. In a previous chapter of Sacred Cows with Uri Sagi, we talked a lot about this issue and its effects, both strategically and tactically. As someone who served for years as an advisor to the heads of Shabak, I wanted you to address and explain your perspective on the significance of using this practice.

Steinberg: I want to distinguish between targeted countermeasures for which I can find utilitarian justification – I am not dealing currently with moral justifications but rather from an operational standpoint, from the perspective of 'He who comes to kill you, kill him first' – this is understandable when we are dealing with ticking bombs, and the countermeasures (assassinations g.b.) is targeted. But when this approach becomes an automatic response, in the absence of any other response, then there is a problem.

Manytimes, there were strategic implications beyond the operational and tactical implementation. That is, itdigressedfromthe question of whether it isAhmad or Mohammed and shifted to the question of the Palestinian issue.

It teaches us about the strategic weight of targeted assassinations. The cemeteries in Gaza are full of “indispensables” (who have no replacement). You see, you eliminate Sheikh Ahmad Yassin, so what? Sinwar rosethereafter. Theoperation provides some satisfaction, but it is deceptive. It may also provide satisfaction to the public, creating somesense of accomplishment, but it is futile.

Perhaps the most prominent example, which led to the dispute that ultimately separated our ways, mine and that of the security service, was the assassination of the senior Fatah operative in the Samaria regionduring the second Intifada...

Ra'aed Karmi?

Steinberg: Ra'aed Karmi. There is no question that he carried out many murders and had a horrific track record from here to forever. But in December 2001, Arafat managed to impose a ceasefire, and if you look at the records of that time, you will see that there were no terror attacks then. He managed to deal with a very chaotic situation. There is no doubt, according to any definition, that Karmimaintained the ceasefire.I can say, not based on assumption but with certainty, based on information, that Karmi worked to prevent others from acting at that time.

Did you advise against that operation?

Steinberg: From the outsetI advised against his assassination, and in retrospect I demanded accountability for it.

Who made the final decision, the prime minister, the defense minister?

Steinberg: I assume it was done in consultation,based on the data and the facts,that the head of the security service presented to the prime minister, and the decision was probably made by the prime minister (Sharon).

The implications were very clear to me. Following months of bloody attacks, there was a ceasefire, no bloodshed for several weeks, and there was the potential for continuity, especially as the Arab summit was about to convene in Beirut, and I knew they would likely approve an Arab peace plan, which might allow for some kind of an exit strategy...

The famous Arab Peace Plan?

Steinberg: Yes, the famous one.

What happened following the assassination of Ra'aed Karmi?

Steinberg: Before that, I also understood that such an assassination could lead to the Fatah will embark suicide attacks, as there were thoughts in terms of *Shuhada al-Aqsa*. In my opinion, it was something with grave significance, because these people were not fundamentalists. They were not expecting 72 virgins in paradise. But when non-fundamentalists and some of them not even religious, get to this place, all bets are off. Unfortunately, that's what happened.

What was the response to your call to refrain from the operation?

Steinberg: They didn't listen. Although there was a ceasefire at the time, during the months before the ceasefire there was horrible bloodshed and the prime minister was apparently exposed to public pressure and needed to appease the public somehow.

What happened after Ra'aed Karmi's assassination?

Steinberg: The gates of hell opened. Fatah's, *Shuhada al-Aqsa*, started suicide attacks under the instructions of Marwan Barghouti. The same Barghouti, who in the 1990s, worked hard to convince the Palestinian public that the diplomatic way was the right way. He, who was in charge of the students and the youths in the 90s, did everything he could and was one of the leading factors in the victory of the Palestinian Authority in the 1996 elections. He was highly active, roaming the city squares, and persuading the public that diplomacy was the way. Since he saw himself as responsible for what happened to Ra'aed Karmi, as he

demanded to cease all military activity and keep calm, his assassination, one could say, changed him and he then activated the suicide cells of Fatah. This is how, among other things, we reached the night of the Passover Seder that year (the attack at the Park Hotel in Netanya where 30 Israelis were killed. Y.B.).

How long after Karmi's assassination did that happen?

Steinberg: Karmi's assassination was on January 14, 2002. Passover was about a month, a month and a half later. And if you remember, these terrible attacks in Netanya led us to Operation Defensive Shield, which had consequences that I could only guess. And I don't need to spell out the strategic repercussions of Operation Defensive Shield.

So, if we return now to the surprise attack, or the lack of surprise in October 7 this year, how did you express the concern or prediction that we were heading in that direction?

Steinberg: I've written a lot about it. In an article in Haaretz published in 2015. Look who created an alliance with Hamas. I tried to explain the strange alliance. I called it antagonistic collaboration – the collaboration between the Israeli government, led by Netanyahu, and Hamas. This alliance is not based on common motives or intentions, but rather on a common denominator between Hamas and the Israeli government in thwarting any possibility for a political settlement.

Later, Bibi continues to deepen the one-sided path that allowed Hamas to take control of Gaza, and to a substantial extent shaped Hamas' rule in Gaza with the billions of dollars that he enabled Qatar to transfer to Gaza, most of which passed through Israel.

Are you essentially saying that the Israeli reluctance to provide a political horizon to the Palestinian issue inevitably strengthened Hamas to the point where it now dominates and shapes the Palestinian agenda?

Steinberg: That's correct, but here we need to identify two stages. The first stage is passive. Essentially, with the lack of progress in the political process, you automatically, by default, promote Hamas, because Hamas was born, or emerged, out of this vacuum. But from 2005 onward, the logic changed a bit. Here, you actively contribute to strengthening Hamas.

Under Netanyahu's policy?

Steinberg: Under Sharon's policy and Netanyahu's approach.

From the bird's eye view, could you sketch roughly some sort of a roadmap that would explain what went wrong or how things could have been different concerning the Palestinian issue, in which we have reached such a dead end without any horizon, and right now even a total lack of trust? Where do we start? In '48, '67, '73, or perhaps at the beginning of Zionism?

Steinberg: I think we need to start – and that was also a personal turning point for me – at a time when there was a change in the Palestinian attitudes.

In 1988?

Steinberg: It matured over the years, but essentially it began in 1984, following the expulsion of the PLO and Arafat from Beirut. In '84, the Palestinian National Council gave initial indications or provided early signs of a possible change in the Palestinian stance. Then in '85, in the Amman Accord between Arafat and (King) Hussein, they essentially created the Jordanian Option, the only feasible one. Then in '88, at the Palestinian National Council in Algeria, they accepted the principle of The Partition. A month later, Arafat implicitly accepted Resolution 242.

In the eyes of the Palestinians, from a historical perspective, there is nothing more offensive than Resolution 242, as it completely ignored the Palestinian issue. It didn't mention them at all. It dealt only with the Arab states. And it set forth the mantra of a political settlement with Israel. In other words, Arafat accepted a decision based on the agreement between Egypt and Israel. That was the code name for the agreement with Israel, which recognizes Israel and is willing to fully coexist with Israel as seen in the peace agreement between Israel and Egypt.

This willingness, in my view, proved the change that took place within the PLO's mainstream which was led by Arafat and Fatah. Compared to his basic axioms, he went very far, even though I don't think that by doing this the PLO intended to get a membership in the Jewish

National Fund or the Zionist Congress. Absolutely not. It was clear to me that what forced the PLO to do it was the reality. And in my view, there is no greater power than the necessity of reality.

At that time, I realized how much people don't feel compelled to act with integrity, or with intellectual integrity at least. Let me give you an example:

Before Arafat recognized Resolution 242 on behalf of the PLO, the experts were saying that as long as the PLO did not recognize Resolution 242, it proved that he was not willing to make the change. In other words, they defined the acceptance or non-acceptance of 242 as a change or strategic continuity. And then, he accepted 242, and everyone, almost to the last person, said: "It's a ploy, it's tactical." And I asked them, "How was what you saw, before he accepted it, meaningful and strategic, and now, after he accepted it, it becomes a tactical ploy and so forth?" I didn't get an answer to that question.

How do you convince the Israeli public, now severely wounded from the ruthless Hamas attacks, that the basic narrative is not a zero-sum game, in which they want to destroy us, kill us, and behead us, with no distinctions between them, and that in fact it is a fundamental, absolute conflict?

Steinberg: Since the tiniest signs of change began to emerge on the other side – certainly in the last 20 years – every Israeli government has consistently refused to consider a political arrangement. Of course, with certain differences, perhaps excluding the episode Olmert had with Abu Mazen (Mahmoud Abbas).

You don't include Barak's "episode"?

Steinberg: No. Maybe because I am quite familiar with this "episode." Barak showed me his plan several months before Camp David, and I believed it made significant progress, but I also argued that if he kept the clause in the plan from which one could understand that we will demand sovereignty over the Temple Mount... it will blow up the entire summit. I suggested that if we keep this clause, it's better not to go to Camp David at all. And if we still decide to go, then let us think about how to respond to the nuclear explosion that will occur there.

The reason is simple: I don't think that we should accept all Palestinian positions as sacrosanct. No. But the question is – if you believe an agreement is crucial or critical, then there is also another side. And the other side – Arafat – his guiding principle, what can be called his ‘strategic trade-off’ at the Camp David summit, relied on the Principle of Return versus the Temple Mount. This means that his willingness to forgo the return (of Palestinian refugees) to Israel was going to be in exchange for the Temple Mount, not necessarily sovereignty over Temple Mount but control over Temple Mount, control that would allow for some sort of time sharing with Jews, and so forth.

Does this mean the failure at Camp David was about Temple Mount?

Steinberg: Temple Mount and nothing else. In essence, when the negotiations failed over the status of Temple Mount, they also failed on the issue of the return (of Palestinian refugees to Israel).

Did you propose alternatives to Barak on the Temple Mount issue?

Steinberg: Yes, I proposed alternatives. The issue of alternatives was discussed after the crisis, after the collapse of the negotiations. How to fix it. But things have already embarked an impossible path.

You asked me a fundamental question; how do I persuade the Israeli public? I would address the audience, the listeners, and tell them this: do you all agree that it takes two to tango? Everyone agrees that you need at least two to conduct a political process, to settle a conflict. Do you all agree? But what would you do if for decades your nemesis, or your representative on the other side, is not willing to respond or accept a final and full settlement with you? With all the problems and costs associated with it, which I do not underestimate.

Then they will tell you, “But Barak offered, and Olmert offered, and nothing happened?”

Steinberg: That's why I said, Barak proposed, but he proposed those things as I had shown you. As for Olmert and Abu Mazen, I am familiar with that as well, although not firsthand. I believe that my level of familiarity (with the topic) is satisfactory, and as part of my sins, I

examined all the documents, the 'Al-Jazeera Papers'. I am talking about nearly 2,000 documents that were leaked from the Palestinian negotiation files. I think I am one of the few crazies who did this. Olmert says, and so does Abu Mazen, regarding this issue, they both say the same thing: that we were on the verge of reaching an agreement.

But then the Israeli government was already falling apart.

Steinberg: Olmert was already at the end of his political life, and he had announced that in the upcoming conference of Kadima (his Party), he would hand over the keys, in light of his personal and legal problems. So, it pushed Olmert to present to Abu Mazen during their last meeting, in effect he was trying to force Abu Mazen to accept a map of the final agreement. This map was a unilateral Israeli plan that also included changes that, in Abu Mazen's view, were too difficult to accept. The map Olmert presented demanded a 22-kilometer-long corridor in Samaria toward Nablus. This corridor would have split (the West Bank) and end any possibility for a Palestinian state. Olmert tried to force it on Abu Mazen, sign it now and get it over with. Abu Mazen did not reject it, he just said, "I'm not an expert in cartography. I need to consult with the experts on this matter, and then I will give you my answer." The answer did not come.

That was not a way to conduct negotiations, in my opinion. But there is a reason it is worth paying attention to. And for example, Condoleezza Rice, the American Secretary of State, says it. She writes about it in her autobiography. I remember vividly the page number. 450. She talks about how the Israeli Foreign Minister, Tzipi Livni, and other (Israeli) senior officials – I quote her – went to her and to other senior American officials and Abu Mazen and told them: "Don't make a deal with this lame duck. Wait for us!"

From the testimony of the head of the National Security Council and Elliot Abrams, who was affiliated, they added the name of (Ehud) Barak to Tzipi Livni's.

So, let's assume that you are Abu Mazen. Step into his shoes for a moment. They come to you, these two, from the top of the Israeli government, and tell you this stuff. What would you do?

Do you think that Arafat was perhaps the last Palestinian leader who could have signed a settlement that would be approved by the Palestinian public?

Steinberg: I think Abu Mazen could have done it too. The question is not who will do it. The question is what the content of the issues is. I am even quite surprised by the relative commitment of the Palestinian public, despite almost 50 years of reluctance to accept a political solution. True, there is a downward trend, but in general, there is a principled willingness to accept a two-state solution by the Palestinian public.

What do you think about the 'assassination of Arafat'? The internal logic says that we got rid of him, or did we want to get rid of him?

Steinberg: I don't know about the option of assassination, but I can say with certainty that we wanted to cause him to die politically. We managed to do it to him and also to a considerable extent to Abu Mazen. Unfortunately, their political lifespan depends on the lifespan of their strategy. And since the strategy is almost dead, then it is the same for these people. We were accustomed to demonizing Arafat.

Do you think he would have been able to reach a political deal with us, in the end?

Steinberg: Yes. Definitely. It was my misfortune. In the intelligence service, I think I was the only one who wrote five or six biographies about him (Arafat). To a considerable extent, I update the material once in a while. I mean, these are real books.

Why don't you publish it as a book?

Steinberg: I can't. It is highly classified material. What I could have said about him openly, I said in my book, both in Hebrew and in English, in those chapters that discuss Arafat ("Standing up to their Fate" Hemed Books, Yedioth Ahronoth Publishing).

What led to the termination of your service as an advisor to the heads of Shabak?

Steinberg: The fact that I criticized the lack of strategic thinking and the focus only on the operational outcomes of (targeted) assassinations.

After Ra'aed Karmi?

Steinberg: Yes, but also before that. I can give you an example. In 2001, the assassination of Sheikh Jamal Mansour in Nablus. I opposed it because I knew from his writings in Arabic how much he was trying to persuade the public and divert it from the path of suicide attacks. So much so, that they started to criticize and attack him.

What did they tell you? We don't need your services anymore? Or did they let you understand it?

Steinberg: They let me understand it.

So, since when are you out of the picture?

Steinberg: The middle of 2003. But here and there I was still called to advise...

You told me that Netanyahu, right from the beginning of his career, didn't like your position in the security service.

Steinberg: I'm not sure if this was told. When I noticed the emerging changes in the attitude of Arafat, Fatah, and the PLO in 1988, and Arafat's willingness to accept Resolution 242, I pointed this out as part of my role as an advisor to the research division in Aman (IDF intelligence division). To a substantial extent, I had the authority to influence and write assessments of the situation, especially on the Palestinian issue. I presented these findings, with all the necessary caution, and suddenly I was faced with leaks in three or four Hebrew newspapers, from someone anonymous, a senior official, saying that a 'foreign agent' infiltrated Aman, and in another place – a 'foreign agent' who dictates his assessments about the Palestinian issue.

It is very possible that the leak came via one of the tycoons close to Netanyahu. Netanyahu was the deputy foreign minister at the time. He had just arrived from New York as our representative at the U.N. (Moshe) Arens appointed him as his deputy. I didn't know yet that it was Netanyahu.

How did you find out it was him?

Steinberg: Here I am required to hide a few things. One of the journalists who heard something from someone who heard something, I didn't know who it was at the time, called me and showered me with questions about the Palestinian issue. My answer to him was that I would not answer any question, and that I would ask only one question: "I know that you are signed on this news story, and I ask you, how do you allow this to happen? You are putting me at risk. If the person who leaked to you has misgivings, please, he should invite me, even summons me to come to a meeting with him. You know what? Even to a confrontation with him. Things like this have already happened. He will present his opinions and I will present mine. I will come, we will debate and confront each other. I am ready to confront him openly, this is the right way."

So... he thought about it, and I felt that he was trying to decide what to do, it looked like he felt pangs of conscience, and he gave me the explicit name.

I went with it to the heads of the intelligence service. I showed them the newspaper clips, and I said to whoever I said – I revealed the name of the journalist so they could clear it up with him. The response came from Amnon Shahak (then head of Military Intelligence, Aman); his answer was, "I see this as a grave issue. I will take care of it." Five-minute conversation.

And was there a continuation?

Steinberg: The flood ceased. But I understood that when someone behaves like that, it shows something about his personality (Netanyahu's. Y.B.).

Let's return to the recent events and their meaning. Do you see the attack on October 7th and its ramifications as a strategic achievement for Hamas or the Palestinian issue?

Steinberg: Things are complex and paradoxical. You know that in historical reality there is a concept called "unintended consequences" or "unintended results." History is cunning, it toys with us. Hegel has already understood it when he spoke about history as cunning. It toys with everyone, both with Hamas and with Israel.

For this purpose, we need to state what are the goals of Hamas and who is Hamas. Hamas is the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brothers. It adapts or matches the global concepts of the Muslim Brothers with the needs of the Palestinian struggle, and it sees itself as responsible for the change in the culture and identity of the Palestinian struggle. The movement combines the general Islamic identity with the specific Palestinian identity and tries to reconcile the two. Nothing has changed since its inception to this day.

Max Weber noticed that in ideological religious movements, there is a domain of the rationale of means, that is, there is a rationale for the operational goals, and a rationale for the values. Hamas has values that are its basic principles, its axioms, and it also has operational goals, which are more temporary. Since it was founded, Hamas has ensured that there will not be any contradiction, as much as possible, between its operational goals and its values. This is exactly what Netanyahu's misconception has ignored in the last 15 years. He considered only the means that Hamas had and ignored the values that define the superior and absolute goal of a fundamentalist movement such as Hamas.

So, you are saying that you have an answer to the question, Is Hamas a rational organization?

Steinberg: Yes. Hamas is rational when it comes to understanding its means and resources. In English, we distinguish between rationale, with an 'e' in the end, and rational. An organization can be rational without a doubt, but its rationale, the supreme logic that guides it, is not rational. It is drawn from religious axioms.

What is not rational? For example, all of Palestine is a *waqf*, it is an Islamic endowment.

Does this mean there is no room for a political settlement?

Steinberg: There is no room for a political settlement that is transactional (a business deal). Just as *waqf* must be free of any deals in the economic sense – it is sacred, it is dedicated to its own purposes – so is the Palestinian issue.

Furthermore, Palestine is defined as *Aknaf beit al mqds*, or *Aknaf Al Quds*, or *Aknaf Al Aqsa*, in the sense of the parts(wings) of the earth (أكناف الأرض). Gaza is included in the *Aknaf Al-Aqsa*. But Gaza is only a benchmark, a launching pad, it cannot be the goal itself for such a movement. Hamas will not be satisfied only with Gaza, it will use it, whenever it can, as a launching pad. As for now, time is not pressing for Hamas because time is a theological time according to the *sabr* doctrine, the doctrine of strategic patience.

So it is not a biological time, but a theological time?

Steinberg: It is not biological time; it is not even historical time in the narrow sense of the term. The *sabr* is a meta-historical concept.

So, what is the rationale for the attack on October 7, according to their method, and why now?

Steinberg: I am making a distinction here taken from the French “Annalestheory”(English: Annals), which is a French school that distinguishes between the essential field and the situational field in history (According to the French historians who developed this theory, events are less fundamental than the mental frameworks that shapes decisions and practices. g.b.). Regarding the structural, essential field, we have seen the axioms of Hamas. Regarding the situational field, here we need to go back to the months, or even years, before October 7th. In order not to indulge in conjectures or speculations, I simply refer to a key interview, which, as far as I could ascertain, no one has looked at. An interview with Salah al-Aruri, from August 25th of this year.

The deputy to Ismail Haniyeh?

Steinberg: Deputy head of the political arm, a key Hamas person responsible for the West Bank. He was one of the founders of the Al-Qassam branch in the West Bank, a person who also thinks militarily.

This interview was originally given to the Lebanese website Al-Mayadeen, which has close ties to Hezbollah and Iran and was also published on all the websites related to Hamas in Gaza. It is a long interview running for almost 15 pages. He talks, a little more than a month

before the attack, about an imminent war. He calls it a “comprehensive war” (*harb shamila*) (حرب شاملة), a total war, that will surprise Israel and change the region.

He does not volunteer the precise details of the plan. He even misleads slightly. But he mentions four or five key reasons that teach us about the timing, as he talks about the war being imminent, about to come. He talks about *Jhahazze*, that it is ready to happen. If I was surprised, I was surprised by the date. For example. I was also surprised by the failed performance of the intelligence and the military on the decisive day. But I was not surprised by the intentions, because I was aware of it, as I said, both structurally and situationally. The first reason that Al-Aruri presented for the planned attack on Israel, which is interesting, is Smotrich's DecisivePlan.

Does he mention the plan by name?

Steinberg: Yes. He mentions the plan and characterizes it as a plan intended to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He mentions two main things. Firstly, this plan, in his view, is based on *Tahjir*, or the expulsion of the Palestinians, or a large part of them, from the West Bank.

A transfer?

Steinberg: A forced transfer. Another thing, the plan seeks or strives to increase the Israeli presence in the territories by more than a million settlers. He points this out, and he says that against this Decisive Plan, we, Hamas must adopt a plan of our own. Although he does not explicitly state it, it can be understood from him that Hamas will have to engage in a preemptive war to prevent the deployment of Smotrich's DecisivePlan. He points out that Smotrich has become a senior minister in the government, he has a senior position, without him there is no coalition, and he also has a senior position at the Ministry of Defense, and he has control over the Israeli civilian presence in the West Bank.

The second point is normalization with Saudi Arabia. Here he says something interesting. They (Hamas) are certainly afraid of a normalization with Israel, which will mark the end of the conflict and all that it entails. But he specifically talks about a different point: he says that the normalization with Saudi Arabia relinquishes Al-Aqsa. In other words, we have reached a

point in which the guardian of the two most holy places (for Islam. i.e., Mecca and Medina) is forsaking the third most important holy place, which is in fact, the first place in terms of the direction of prayer. He mainly talks about normalization in the context of surrendering Al-Aqsa, which means giving Israel a free hand to take over Al-Aqsa.

And there is another operative point; he mentions that most of the Israeli regular force is located in the West Bank. He even mentions that more than 30 battalions are stationed in the West Bank and only a minority is in Gaza. This is certainly an operative consideration in his view.

The fourth point is the political split in Israel, which has reached a breaking point, and had a serious effect on the performance of the military. This interview was published on August 25 (2023), just over a month before the attack.

When you read this and connect it to the inner logic of all these points, you understand that something is about to happen.

Steinberg: It resonates with me with everything I've written before...

You may not know the dates, but you understand the process.

Steinberg: I understand the intentions. I have been talking about these intentions for several years.

So, you're not surprised?

Steinberg: I am not surprised at all by the intentions and their implementation by Hamas.

Do you have the tools to warn, sound the alarm, and draw attention?

Steinberg: I wrote about this. I also tell myself, from my experience in these organizations, (the information) is available to me as it is to everyone else. In September, I saw films that were screened on the website of Izz ad-Din al-Qassam, where they were showing military training on a model of a Jewish settlement. And I said to myself... it's completely pointless.

Every rookie in the intelligence service must have seen them. Why should I bother them (with my concerns)?

Since around 2015-2016, there has been a plan to conquer the Gaza Envelop, which included, as a central feature, kidnappings, which are particularly important to them. Only that Hamas did not yet make the final decision on this issue.

Remember that in the second half of 2020, Hamas held talks with Fatah about the possibility of integration in the upcoming elections to the legislative council, the presidency, and the PLO, and the possibility of Hamas' integration in these elections. Do you remember?

Regarding the issue of "What is to be done" per Lenin – they had two schools of thought: Aruri, who is originally a military man, was in favor of trying to exploit the loss of credit and the degradation of the PA's image in the eyes of the Palestinian public and integrating into the elections to confront all the Palestinians' opponents with the fact that Hamas was elected in democratic elections. Meanwhile, Mohammad Daif believed the only way, the one and only way was military action. I think that Sinwar's compromise was, "let's first try the political path". Then these talks took place, and all they did was deal with the technical, procedural aspects of the elections...

Who was involved in these talks?

Steinberg: Jibril Rajoub of Fatah and Salah Aruri. Both of them are from the Hebron area and know each other well. However, in the end, the elections did not take place because Israel objected to the participation of the Arabs from East Jerusalem in the elections, and neither Hamas nor Fatah could agree on this.

When did these talks between Aruri and Rajoub take place?

Steinberg: Before Operation Defensive Shield in May 2021. After the elections option failed, what remained as a default option was the military option. Hence, (Mohammad) Deif (the head of the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades, g.b.) simply pulled this plan out of the drawer, prepared the forces, trained them, and made it operational.

And now is Jibril Rajoub, in his recent statements, essentially joining in Hamas' narrative more or less, by stating that the West Bank also needs to move in a militant direction?

Steinberg: Yes. When there are no other options, deterrence is damaged by default, psychologically speaking. When there is no spectrum of choices but only one option, we find ourselves in a situation where there is nothing left to lose. But here I want to explain the operational goal of Hamas. Hamas' goal was to undermine the status quo. The goal was not to defeat the IDF or the State of Israel, the goal was to survive –*sumud* (in Arabic), to endure (to hold position, to persist). That is, to undermine and survive.

To survive against Smotrich's DecisivePlan and normalization initiative with Saudi Arabia?

Steinberg: Also, against the military response of Israel. And when dealing with survival, the issue of the captives (hostages) is a strategic matter from the first moment.

They understand that there will be a very harsh response by the IDF to the Palestinian attack (on Israel), and they prepare for it with a strategy of survival using the hostages as human shield?

A strategy of *sumud* (survival). This includes using Gaza's residents as human shield, setting the pace and direction of the war, and ultimately surviving by the use of the hostages as their strategic card. Because if you can release the hostages by military means alone, of course, you will undermine this strategy. But if you cannot do it, and they do everything to prevent their release, then you need an address. If you need an address, they survive.

Because they exist as the only address?

Steinberg: Correct, as an address. Here we need to understand another thing. Hamas accepts unequivocally Israel's absolute military and technological superiority. What they want to do is to use this asymmetry as an advantage. This explains the underground city and tunnels under Gaza. Five hundred kilometers. It explains why they are interested in Israel's excessive response...

Does an excessive response indicate weakness?

Steinberg: It not only indicates weakness, but it also weakens (Israel) because it creates antagonism against Israel in the world's public opinion. It leads to the delegitimization of the strong side and the legitimization of the weak side, given the broadcasted pictures that people see. We talked about the hostages; they are playing it very smart, by using this card.

What is Hamas' stance on the damage caused to the population in Gaza and the destruction of neighborhoods and cities?

Steinberg: My understanding of their understanding is that the majority of the Palestinians in Gaza are in a state of mind of 'nothing to lose.' Why nothing? For a very simple reason. They don't see any other options. What does 'nothing to lose' mean? Here I am using Kahneman and Tversky's explanation. One of their early research projects dealt with the question of what is the meaning of 'nothing to lose'. When the distinction is made between injury (or damage) in the objective sense and pain in the psychological sense, you find that the more material harm and losses you inflict on a rival, the more pain the rival experiences. The pain increases when the injury increases.

However, as this (process) continues, people become numb to the cost of the material injury and even to human lives. At that time, the pain does not match the severity of the injury.

Do you understand where this comes from? It does not happen because of their mentality. It occurs because of something completely rational. It is the absence of options. Only one option remains. Therefore, what I see is that you will hardly find any direct criticism of Hamas in Gaza at all, even today, after this great devastation, even in the most tough times.

Do you see this (attitude) as authentic solidarity or perhaps something out of fear?

Steinberg: When someone blows up your entire family and everyone dies, and you are left alone, then there are no considerations of 'I fear something.' The response is psychological and expressive. There are live broadcasts on Al Jazeera in Arabic, which as part of my sins, I am forced to watch, and sometimes they are difficult to bear. I don't disregard the grief and

the great disaster of October 7th, but we are already two months after the attack, and it is being forgotten. We only remember it because of one thing: Hamas wants to remind us of it through the hostages. This is how they preserve the memory of their victory on that day. Do you understand me?

We are now two months after the attack, and I see little criticism of Hamas. The explanation is completely rational. They have no other option.

From your description, one can learn that Hamas exercises systematic strategic thinking. So, I want to ask a broader question: Can you compare or assess the quality of thinking, maybe the depth of thinking on both sides? Do we exercise systematic thinking toward the Palestinian issue?

Steinberg: Unfortunately, it has been going on for decades. One can say, since '67, we haven't made a strategic decision on what to do with this refrigerator, forgive me for calling it that way. Should we sell it, should we buy it, what should we do with it? Moreover, any assessment of the situation in the strategic arena – and this is the main reason that forced me to retire from the security service – any strategic thinking on this subject corresponds with the ideologies that guide the different governments.

Do you mean, that ideology takes over the clarity of thinking or discussion?

Steinberg: As soon as you deal with strategic considerations you start to come too close or even collide with fundamental concepts, with considerably basic ideologies. I'll give you an example. I see no indication that the Israeli government has any clear picture of the 'End Game' in this war. On the contrary. Perhaps the government avoids it because it raises fundamental questions about policy. For example, regarding the affinity between Gaza and the West Bank. This raises fundamental questions about the possibility of a political settlement, yes or no. The Israeli government categorically avoids it, and it has enormous consequences.

If we leave the government for a moment, do the professionals understand the other side? If we are surprised repeatedly, what don't we understand about the other side and what do the professionals not understand?

Steinberg: It is clear that the experts have failed miserably here. A failure that reminds us in principle, and it is an astounding coincidence, that it is exactly fifty years (later), almost a day apart at the same time in 73', the Yom Kippur War. In principle, despite the differences in circumstances and all, in terms of the failure, it is the same failure. The influence of the concept or the misconception on the understanding of reality, on the understanding of the situation, on the interpretation of the various indications. As a result, it has also left its mark on professional performance and preparation.

Here comes another thing, which in my opinion exacerbated the lack of understanding in the recent crisis. The excessive dependence on technological means. In English, they call it lopsided dependence, completely dependent on technological means. Let me formulate it in a somewhat far-reaching way: the concept is that you do not need human intelligence where there is artificial intelligence. Or another way: the thought that 'the more information you have, in terms of data, the more understanding and knowledge you have'. This is a fatal mistake. Information and overload of information do not lead to more knowledge or understanding.

As a result, our experts neglected to understand the essential structure of Hamas. They were not aware that Hamas, in the simplest form, is a fundamentalist organization with absolute values, and that it is different in its operative thinking. The operative thinking ultimately aligns with the values.

These things were simply forgotten. Otherwise, I cannot explain how they concluded and almost asserted, with no question marks, that Hamas was content with its rule over Gaza, and that this was its superior interest and completely forgot the Palestinian religious endowment and the teaching that Al-Aqsa is located at the heart of Palestine, and radiates its holiness to all the corners of Palestine?

After all, in May 2021, during Operation Defensive Shield, the conflict first broke out not in Gaza but in Jerusalem. It broke out in Al-Aqsa. That was the cause, and from there it also radiated to Gaza. And to emphasize this, they have now called their operation *Tufan Al-Aqsa*, the Flood of Al-Aqsa.

I'm afraid that artificial intelligence has pushed aside human understanding.

How do the professionals who are doing your job, by which I mean reading the writings, the incredibly broad discourse that you describe, can draw conclusions similar to yours?

Steinberg: The answer is they can't. They are all prisoners of the computer, of this box, and do not go out of this box. Because the computer brings you all this excess of technological products, it makes you think that this is reality. But this is not reality. I do not dismiss technology and the achievements of the technological revolution, but one needs to understand its limitations. It has advantages, and one can derive great benefits from it, such as in the operational and tactical domains. But let's not blur the differences between the tactical and strategic domains. The Hamas men in the field are one thing, the Palestinian issue and Hamas's strategic views are another thing. Am I clear?

Yes, absolutely!

Steinberg: Despite all this, I must talk about the unintended negative consequences or ramifications of the war for Hamas. Hamas sought to undermine the existing status quo and create a new, positive status quo for its benefit. But what happens? Aside from Iran and its proxies, possibly also Russia, in general, there is a common denominator for all the Arab and Islamic states, the countries of the West, and, of course, the United States, that Hamas must be weakened in a way that it will not be a significant factor to reckon with on the Day After. This may undermine the status quo and set in motion a process that may allow bypassing Hamas or weakening it even further. For example, if as a result of this terrible crisis, a political process develops, and indeed it can develop, take a look at the unequivocal position of the United States on this matter.

What you say is that a political process will significantly dry out Hamas?

Steinberg: Hamas' biggest enemy is not the IDF. Hamas' biggest enemy, throughout its existence, is a political settlement. Hamas has always made extraordinary efforts, including suicide attacks as you remember, to torpedo any possibility of a political process.

But, as we have seen in the past, the opposition to a political settlement had veto power on both sides (Israel right-wing parties and Hamas).

Steinberg: Right. The blow that would weaken Hamas, even if it may not eliminate it completely, is the possibility that a political process will take place. I am talking about a political settlement – not something abstract, far on the horizon, but something very concrete. In fact, the vacuum created by the weakening of Hamas in Gaza can be filled through a political settlement, on whose wings the support of Arab and Islamic countries will come, as seen in the Arab Peace Initiative, which isolated Iran.

Look at this paradox: the attack by Hamas could lead to the exact opposite result and deal it a fatal blow. It could indeed happen, but it also depends on the Israeli government, which, so far, has been trying to avoid a decision.

Considering the strategic thinking of the fundamentalist groups, Hamas and Hezbollah, do the October events represent a prelude for a final operation that will annihilate Israel in their view?

Steinberg: If the Arab Peace Initiative is implemented, and it brings with it economic aid from countries such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and the whole world, it will provide a sense of a better future, not only in terms of a new political order but also a better future in general for Gaza. But it may well be that this vacuum will be filled by one of three other factors:

Hamas, as mentioned earlier, will be weakened as an active force.

The second possibility is that this vacuum will be filled by a distinctive political setting, which will involve the Palestinian Authority, with all the changes it needs to undergo.

The third possibility is that this vacuum will be filled by the continued presence and control of Gaza by the IDF. I foresee a very grave scenario if this will happen. The third possibility could lead to the dire scenario you presented earlier in your question. The continued presence of IDF forces in Gaza could turn into a quagmire, as the IDF forces will essentially turn into a garrison sinking in a very deep mud.

Hamas is beginning to talk about this possibility, about the need to turn Gaza into a *mustankeh* (swamp). Another word Hamas uses in his writings is *wahhel* (a deep-sinking swamp). That is, to go through a process of Vietnamization, Lebanization, and perhaps even Iraqization. Remember, the American military victory in Iraq was immediate, within days. But what happened after that?

It looks like at the moment there is no exit strategy from the current situation...

Steinberg: Right. In general, I say, when fighting terrorism, there is an iron rule that states that you have to make sure that you know from the start where you are going. Where you are heading. It must not be the result of what you have done. You have to calculate your steps with what you are doing. This is a basic rule.

Audrey Cronin wrote a very good book about it, published in 2009 by Princeton University Press. The title of the book is *How Terrorism Ends*. She explains the supreme importance of knowing where you are going. Otherwise, this whole struggle becomes futile.

It reminds me of this fable from the fifth century BCE of Aesop, about two rivals who ended up floating in the same boat in a stormy sea. One sits at the stern of the boat and the other at the bow of the boat. And the one sitting at the bow of the boat is comforted by the thought that the other will die before him. Is that what we want? When you have no exit strategy, it becomes like Aesop's fable from the fifth century BCE.

Now, I see another serious development. First, the global jihad – and this is indeed just the beginning – then Al-Qaeda, then the Islamic State (Daesh-ISIS), they observe what is happening here, and begin to recalibrate their worldview. If until now the Palestinian issue was a relatively distant, visionary idea that needed to be addressed only after carrying out revolutions in the Arab world – a psalm to be sung in the invisible future – now they define it as a contemporary issue, mainly in the writings of Al-Qaeda, as Gaza turns into a place of anarchy, chaos, and lawlessness; in their terms *fauḍa* and *tawāchūsh* (chaos and barbarism).

They have, already since 20-30 years ago, an institutionalized doctrine of *Hadrat al-fauḍa wa-al-tawāchūsh*, which means managing the chaos to use it, integrate into it, and seize control. I

now see that they are beginning to prepare for it. First of all, they call on their followers to cooperate with Hamas. They say that October 7th proved to be a jihadist cause.

Up until then, their attitude toward the Muslim Brothers was critical if not heretical. After all, they emerged as a result of breaking away from the Muslim Brothers.

So, you're saying that ISIS and the forces of the global jihad did not die out?

Steinberg: No. The claim that they vanished is factually incorrect. True, they moved to the periphery. But they are highly active in Africa, and the Gaza issue provides them with the opportunity to return to the center stage.

So, the idea of *fauda* and *tawachush* also explains the incredible cruelty we saw on October 7th, the desire to cause shock and panic to the Israelis? Beheadings, rape, and murder of women and children...

Steinberg: I haven't seen the complete text of their operational order, but versions of the operational plan appeared in the media, here and there. They had objectives that were defined in military terms— occupation, kidnappings, specifically regarding kidnappings, to do as much as possible, and take anyone. I don't deny that this is what happened, there is no doubt about it. I think, however, that this is the expressive part. It goes beyond the cognitive portion and enters the savage part of things.

To our dismay, such things have happened throughout our history. If we take the example of the Holocaust – such animalistic behavior by humans. For me personally, it was not a surprise. I saw that there were differences, just as there are differences between humans, between Sinwar and others, just as there are differences between me and you, between me and someone else in various respects; but I also saw a common denominator. I have never defined Sinwar as a pragmatist. No. He sticks to the common denominator, which is the denial of any settlement with Israel and a focus on the violent path, whether it be called Jihad or *mukawama*, or both of them together as the only way. I don't doubt that what made it even worse is the fact that they were in a situation where they had nothing to lose, and then you don't...

And then you don't need to adhere to humane or humanitarian values?

Steinberg: Yes. There are no restraints and limitations.

Given the reality you described, do you see in the composition of the political players we have right now any way out, any light at the end of the tunnel?

Steinberg: If you are talking about the Israeli side, then no. I don't see it.

Does this mean that this government, due to its ideological makeup, will not take any step forward, and the alternative of insubordination is disastrous?

Steinberg: The alternative is disastrous because I am presenting it as just one option. And one alternative has two options: a process that will sink us in the Gaza quagmire, with all its implications, while we serve the will of Hamas. This will allow Hamas to recover and bring all the elements of the global jihad into Gaza. The situation will be chaotic. It seems strange to me that in Israel, some consider leaving Gaza in a state of chaos as an objective. They are agents of chaos. This, to me, is unreasonable. This is a total lack of understanding. I would remind them of the words of Jeremiah, when he cursed Moab and said, "I wish you to be like a dove nesting on the edge of a pit." (Jeremiah 48:28).

This is a curse. You cannot be at a peaceful place when you are standing on the edge of a pit. You cannot be a dove and enjoy any kind of tranquility when Gaza is in such a chaotic state. It will be cast upon you, reflect on you, and (you can only imagine) how it will reflect on you. What have you done? You wanted to severely weaken Hamas, and, in the end, you provided Hamas with the best conditions for recovery.

That is one option. The second option is to completely change the disc. There hasn't been a time since the formulation of the Arab Initiative when it was more relevant than it is today. We need to make it relevant. When Saudi Arabia controls the interpretation of this initiative for the Arab and Islamic sides, we will be able to interpret it in a way that gives us important room to maneuver. Because this initiative, whoever looks at it, contains only general principles. It doesn't say anything explicitly. For example, there is no clause calling for the

evacuation of all the settlements. I am not saying that they are willing to allow all the settlements to remain, but they leave a wide margin for negotiation.

Is there any chance that the current Israeli government will accept this? Is there a chance that international pressure will lead it to accept such a direction?

Steinberg: I hope for international pressure, only international pressure, only a decisive American position, beyond words. And the words are spoken by Biden, Harris, the Vice President, Blinken, and all the others. They say these things, and in my view, it's all common sense. That is the only alternative to the option I mentioned that would pull us into chaos.

Okay, thank you.

Steinberg: I hope I have explained myself.

You explained yourself excellently... The situation is less than excellent...

This was Chapter 78. "The foreign agent who infiltrated Aman and warned of Hamas' intentions." A conversation with Mati Steinberg, the Shabak advisor on Palestinian affairs, who was fired for predicting the catastrophes to come.

As always, we would appreciate support for this project, which is done entirely voluntarily, in translation to English, video editing, or financial contribution. Details are in the "Help and Donation" section on the Sacred Cows website.

See you in the next chapters.