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Manara Square, Ramallah

IT WAS murder in broad daylight. Undercover soldiers disguised as Arabs, accompanied by armored vehicles and bulldozers and supported by helicopter gunships, invaded the center of Ramallah. Their aim was to kill or capture a Fatah militant, Rabee' Hamid. The man was wounded but managed to escape.

As always, the place was teeming with people. Manara Square is the heart of Ramallah, full of life, both walking and driving. When people realized what was going on, they started to throw stones at the soldiers. These responded by shooting wildly in all directions. Four bystanders were killed, more than 30 wounded.

The routinely mendacious army press release announced that the four had been armed. Indeed? One of them was a street vendor named Khalil al-Bairouti, who used to sell hot beverages from a small cart at this place. Another was Jamal Jweelis from Shuafat near Jerusalem, who had come to Ramallah to buy new clothes and sweets for the engagement party of his brother, which was scheduled for the next day. Hearing that approaching bulldozers were crushing vehicles in the street, Jamal ran out of the shop to remove his car.

That happened nine days ago. A "routine" action, like so many others that take place in the occupied Palestinian territories almost daily. But this time it created an international uproar, because on that very day Ehud Olmert was due to meet the President of Egypt, Husni Mubarak in Sharm el Sheikh. The host was deeply offended. Do the Israelis despise him so much, that they so lightly put him to shame in the eyes of his people and the Arab world? At the end of the meeting, he gave vent to his anger in no uncertain terms, in the presence of Olmert, who muttered some weak words of apology.

In Israel, the usual game of passing the buck, known as "covering one's ass", began. Who was responsible? As usual, someone low down in the hierarchy. The Prime Ministers's people first suspected that the Minister of Defense, Amir Peretz, had done it to trip up Olmert. Peretz denied any prior knowledge of the action, and passed the buck on to the Chief-of-Staff, who, he implied, wanted to bring about the downfall of both Olmert and Peretz. The C-o-S transferred the responsibility to the Commander of the Central Front, Ya'ir Naveh, a Kippa-wearing general known as especially brutal, with extreme right-wing views. In the end it was decided that some officer lower down had approved the action, and that all the responsibility was his.

Even if you believe all these denials - and I most certainly do not - the image is no less disturbing: a chaotic army, out of control, where every officer can do as he sees fit (or unfit).

TWO DAYS later, my wife Rachel and I visited the place. It was early evening. Under an intermittent drizzle, Manara ("lighthouse") Square was again teeming with people. Traffic jams blocked all the six streets leading to the square

Zacharia, the Palestinian friend who was accompanying us, was clearly worried. He tried to persuade us not to go there so soon after the incident. But nothing happened.

Posters of Arafat were hanging on the column in the center of the square and on some walls. In a mini-market there were photos of Saddam Hussein. One of the walls carried angry graffiti: "We Don't Need Your Aid!" (You the Americans? The Europeans? The aid agencies?)

The four lions surrounding the column in the square looked to me forlorn and helpless. One of them is wearing a watch on his leg. The designer had added the watch as a joke and the Chinese who were contracted to produce the lions according to the plan did precisely that.

In the end we entered a coffee shop. While we were sitting and enjoying the coffee, all the lights went out. Before we could start to worry, people around us used their cigarette lighters and cellular phones. After some minutes, the lights went on again.

On the way home to the hotel in a side street, we took a taxi. The driver, who did not know that we were Israelis, talked all the way with his brother in Arabic on his phone. He ended the conversation with three words: "Yallah. Lehitraot. Bye." Yallah (something like OK) in Arabic. Lehitraot ("see you again") in Hebrew. Bye in English.

WHEN WE told our friends in Tel-Aviv that we were off to a conference in Ramallah, they thought that we had taken leave of our senses. "To Ramallah? And now of all times, after what has just happened there?"

The organizers of the conference - Faculty for Israeli-Palestinian Peace, an international group of academics - also hesitated. True, the conference was arranged several weeks ago, but perhaps it would be best to postpone it for a week or two? Was it wise to bring to Ramallah dozens of Israelis, less than 24 hours after the killing?

In the end, it was decided, quite rightly, that this was exactly the right time and place to convene the conference. The representatives of 23 Palestinian, 22 Israeli and 15 international organizations were lodged for three days in a Ramallah hotel, met, ate together and discussed the one subject that was on everybody's mind: how to act together to put an end to the occupation which produces daily horrors like the Manara Square killing spree?

It was important to hold the conference precisely at this place for another reason: Since the murder of Yasser Arafat, the connections between the Israeli and Palestinian peace forces at the higher level had become tenuous. Unlike Arafat [incidentally, Uri Dan, Sharon's confidant, recently put to rest any doubt that the late Palestinian President was indeed murdered], Mahmoud Abbas obviously does not think that they are important. That is one of the reasons - one of many - for the pessimism that has infected parts of the peace camp.

Therefore, the very fact that such a conference was taking place was important. Israelis, Palestinians and international activists mingled and sat together, proposed actions, stressed the common aim. On the second day, the conference broke up into smaller workshops, where participants from Tel-Aviv and Hebron, Nablus and New York, Barcelona and Kfar-Sava put forward ideas for joint actions.

There were also some stormy debates, though not between Israelis and Palestinians, but about differences of opinion that did not follow national lines. The most important one: Should the main effort be devoted to action in the country or abroad?

The representative of an Israeli group argued with much feeling that there was nothing to be done inside the country, that all the efforts should be focused on winning over international public opinion, on the lines of the world-wide boycott that had been so successful against South Africa. In response, a Palestinian activist argued that the only important thing was to influence public opinion in Israel, which was, after all, the occupier. I also argued that the main effort should be directed towards Israel, even if actions abroad can be useful, too. I vigorously opposed the idea of a general boycott against Israel, because - among other things - it would push the public into the arms of the Right. (However, I do support the idea of a boycott against specific targets that are clearly identified with the occupation, such as the settlements, suppliers of certain military equipment, universities with branches in the occupied territories etc.)

SOME DAYS later a comparable meeting took place in the capital of Spain. But there was a difference between the two conferences - much like the difference between Sun Square in Madrid and Manara Square in Ramallah.

Madrid saw a congregation of respectable personalities, Members of the Knesset (including supporters of the government that is responsible for the bloodshed in Ramallah, one of them a representative of a neo-Fascist party) together with some notables from the Palestinian authority and their colleagues from Arab and other countries. In Ramallah there came together the veterans of the fight for peace, people who had stood fast dozens of times in a cloud of tear gas and against rubber-coated bullets. One group of Palestinians and Israelis, who arrived together late on the first day, came straight from a demonstration in Bill'in, where the army had used a water cannon, tear gas and also rubber bullets.

The guests in Madrid had come by plane. The guests in Ramallah had a much tougher time getting there. The Israelis had to squirm through checkpoints on their way in, and even more on the way back. Israelis (except settlers) break the law when they travel to the occupied territories. But for the Palestinians, it was ten times harder to get to Ramallah. A guest from Nablus told us that he had left home at 2 AM in order to reach the conference at 11 AM. The guest from Tubas, near Nablus, spent eight hours on the road and at the checkpoints - much more than the time needed to get from Tel-Aviv to Madrid.

The Madrid conference was covered extensively in the Israeli media, day after day. The Ramallah conference was not mentioned with one single word in any Israeli newspaper, TV or radio station, except for a single line in the gossip column in Maariv, which said: "Uri Avnery has temporarily gone to live in Ramallah".

THE MADRID conference was relevant mainly as proof that Israeli and Palestinian politicians can sit together, even after all that has happened. What was the importance of the meeting in Ramallah?

In the past, I have taken part in many similar conferences that have borne no fruit. This time, too, the obstacles are enormous. But more than ever, it is clear that action must be taken against the occupation, and that the action must be joint, consistent and well planned.

In five months, the occupation will be 40 years old - perhaps the longest-lasting military occupation regime the world has ever seen. At the conference, there was general agreement that all forces must be concentrated in a great public campaign to mark this shameful date and draw attention to the injustices of the occupation, the harm it does not only to the Palestinians but also to the Israelis, to bring the Green Line back into the public consciousness, to act against the roadblocks and the Annexation Wall, and for the release of the prisoners of both sides. For this purpose, the conference decided to set up "an Israeli-Palestinian-International Coalition to End the Occupation".

The continuation will depend on the willpower, courage and devotion of all peace forces, and their ability to cooperate beyond the roadblocks, walls and fences - one of whose aims is precisely to obstruct such cooperation.

Time is pressing. Perhaps that is why one of the lions in Manara Square has a watch.