

Israel's Intifada Victory

By Charles Krauthammer *The Washington Post* June 18, 2004

While no one was looking, something historic happened in the Middle East. The Palestinian intifada is over, and the Palestinians have lost.

For Israel, the victory is bitter. The past four years of terrorism have killed almost 1,000 Israelis and maimed thousands of others. But Israel has won strategically. The intent of the intifada was to demoralize Israel, destroy its economy, bring it to its knees, and thus force it to withdraw and surrender to Palestinian demands, just as Israel withdrew in defeat from southern Lebanon in May 2000.

That did not happen. Israel's economy was certainly wounded, but it is growing again. Tourism had dwindled to almost nothing at the height of the intifada, but tourists are returning. And the Israelis were never demoralized. They kept living their lives, the young people in particular returning to cafes and discos and buses just hours after a horrific bombing. Israelis turned out to be a lot tougher and braver than the Palestinians had imagined.

The end of the intifada does not mean the end of terrorism. There was terrorism before the intifada and there will be terrorism to come. What has happened, however, is an end to systematic, regular, debilitating, unstoppable terror -- terror as a reliable weapon. At the height of the intifada, there were nine suicide attacks in Israel killing 85 Israelis in just one month (March 2002). In the past three months there have been none.

The overall level of violence has been reduced by more than 70 percent. How did Israel do it? By ignoring its critics and launching a two-pronged campaign of self-defense.

First, Israel targeted terrorist leaders -- attacks so hypocritically denounced by Westerners who, at the same time, cheer the hunt for, and demand the head of, Osama bin Laden. The top echelon of Hamas and other terrorist groups has been either arrested, killed or driven underground. The others are now so afraid of Israeli precision and intelligence -- the last Hamas operative to be killed by missile was riding a motorcycle -- that they are forced to devote much of their time and energy to self-protection and concealment.

Second, the fence. Only about a quarter of the separation fence has been built, but its effect is

unmistakable. The northern part is already complete, and attacks in northern Israel have dwindled to almost nothing.

This success does not just save innocent lives; it changes the strategic equation of the whole conflict.

Yasser Arafat started the intifada in September 2000, just weeks after he had rejected, at Camp David, Israel's offer of withdrawal, settlement evacuation, sharing of Jerusalem and establishment of a Palestinian state. Arafat wanted all that, of course, but without having to make peace and recognize a Jewish state. Hence the terror campaign -- to force Israel to give it all up unilaterally.

Arafat failed, spectacularly. The violence did not bring Israel to its knees. Instead, it created chaos, lawlessness and economic disaster in the Palestinian areas. The Palestinians know the ruin that Arafat has brought, and they are beginning to protest it. He promised them blood and victory; he delivered on the blood.

Even more important, they have lost their place at the table. Israel is now defining a new equilibrium that will reign for years to come -- the separation fence is unilaterally drawing the line that separates Israelis and Palestinians. The Palestinians were offered the chance to negotiate that frontier at Camp David and chose war instead. Now they are paying the price.

It stands to reason. It is the height of absurdity to launch a terrorist war against Israel, then demand the right to determine the nature and route of the barrier built to prevent that very terrorism.

These new strategic realities are not just creating a new equilibrium, they are creating the first hope for peace since Arafat officially tore up the Oslo accords four years ago. Once Israel has withdrawn from Gaza and has completed the fence, terrorism as a strategic option will be effectively dead. The only way for the Palestinians to achieve statehood and dignity, and to determine the contours of their own state, will be to negotiate a final peace based on genuine coexistence with a Jewish state.

It could be a year, five years or a generation until the Palestinians come to that realization. The pity is that so many, Arab and Israeli, will have had to die before then.

No sense negotiating with terrorists

By William B. Helmreich NewsDay Magazine June 30, 2004

Last year, I spent a good deal of time speaking with religious terrorists for a forthcoming film, called "Blood and Tears," about the Middle East conflict. Some allowed their names to be used, others did not, but all had in common a mind-set that we need to understand if we are to overcome the threat they pose to our lives.

Relying on increased security measures, new policies and theorizing about the causes of terrorism, while important, is simply not enough. A truly effective counter-terror strategy would have to reflect the unique personality traits that separate the terrorists from the rest of us and from all other enemies.

To the uninitiated, terrorists can appear quite normal. They walk through parks, eat in restaurants, laugh at jokes and dress like anyone else. When I spoke with Abdel Aziz Rantisi, the recently assassinated head of Hamas, he talked with pride about his children as he introduced me to his son, a university student. He reminded me that, as a pediatrician, he loved children.

Similarly, Sheik Hamed al-Bitawi, a prominent West Bank Hamas leader who chairs the Association of Religious Clerics in Palestine, lovingly presented his wife and children to me, smiling indulgently as he posed for a family photo.

Asked about his view of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the sheik fixed me with a hard stare: "For us, the suicide bombers are like angels sent to us from heaven. Their lives have just begun."

Kindness and cruelty. Love for one's own children and unspeakable hatred toward the children of others. These clashing traits coexist perfectly within the religious terrorist. In his own community, he is compassionate and understanding. Outside that community, he justifies cold-blooded murder because he is now in a world populated by infidels, traitors and other enemies who must be eradicated.

The main agenda is to set up a theocratic state where all who disagree are eliminated. As the recent spate of beheadings emphatically demonstrates, to the enemy we are not human.

Al-Bitawi's views are echoed by religious terrorists from Indonesia to Pakistan; from Saudi Arabia to the United States. Mohamed Atta, of 9/11 infamy, told those whom he sent on their fateful mission: "When you board the plane, remember that

this is a battle for the sake of God, which is worth the whole world and all that is in it."

True, everyone compartmentalizes, but religious terrorists differ in terms of the degree to which their worlds are contradictory and in the intensity of their beliefs. Part of that intensity comes from their view that they are located somewhere along a historical continuum, and are therefore responsible for the future, and morally obligated to act. Religious terrorists truly believe that they speak directly with God and he, they assert, responds with love and guidance.

Put simply, religious terrorists live in another world. Unlike, say, the Weathermen of '60s fame, they have no political platform for change. The agenda is purely theocratic and absolute, with not a scintilla of concern for the lives of nonbelievers. In such a situation negotiation is useless, for there is nothing to negotiate about.

As Sheik Omar Abdel Rahman, spiritual mastermind of the 1993 World Trade Center bombings, asserted unequivocally, "There is no truce in jihad against the enemies of Allah." Moreover, minor concessions, while they may appear successful in the short run, serve only to convince the religious terrorist that total victory is just around the corner.

Whether in Iraq or Spain or France, those who live in a world centered around death see it as so much a part of life that they have become immune to the will to live that is a basic part of human nature. Fear for the consequences of their actions does not move or concern them. Nor do rational calculations such as prudence or a desire for financial gain.

For all these reasons, it is a dangerous mistake to pursue people like Osama bin Laden with the same tactics that led to Saddam Hussein's capture. Those who protect bin Laden are true believers and are, therefore, highly unlikely to be compromised or bought off. When it come to religiously-based terror, we must reluctantly recognize that there are only two real choices here - protect ourselves and eliminate the terrorists or turn the world over to them.

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Israel's Wayward Prime Ministers

By Daniel Pipes The New York Sun June 29, 2004

Two patterns have shaped Israel's history since 1992 and go far to explain Israel's predicament today. First, every elected prime minister has broken his

word on how he would deal with the Arabs. Second, each one of them has adopted a unexpectedly concessionary approach.

Here is one example of deception from each of the four prime ministers:

Yitzhak Rabin promised the Israeli public immediately after winning office in June 1992 that "with the PLO as an organization, I will not negotiate." A year later, however, he did precisely that. Rabin defended dealing with Yasir Arafat by saying he had found no other Palestinians to do business with, so to "advance peace and find a solution," he had to turn to the PLO.

Benjamin Netanyahu promised before his election in 1996 that under his leadership, Israel "will never descend from the Golan." In 1998, however, as I established in *The New Republic* and Bill Clinton just confirmed in his memoirs, Netanyahu changed his mind and planned to offer Damascus the entire Golan in return for a peace treaty.

Ehud Barak flat-out promised during his May 1999 campaign a "Jerusalem, united and under our rule forever, period." In July 2000, however, at the Camp David II summit, he offered much of eastern Jerusalem to the Palestinian Authority.

Ariel Sharon won a landslide victory in January 2003 over his Labor opponent, Amram Mitzna, who called for "evacuating the settlements from Gaza." Mr. Sharon ridiculed this approach, saying that it "would bring the terrorism centers closer to [Israel's] population centers." In December 2003, however, Mr. Sharon adopted Mitzna's unilateral withdrawal idea.

Prime ministers sometimes complain about other ones breaking their word. Mr. Netanyahu, for example, pointed out in August 1995 that Rabin had "promised in his election campaign not to talk with the PLO, not to give up territory during this term of office, and not to establish a Palestinian state. He is breaking all these promises one by one." Of course, when he got to office, Mr. Netanyahu also broke his promises "one by one."

What prompts each of Israel's recent prime ministers to renege on his resolute intentions and instead adopt a policy of unilateral concessions?

In some cases, it is a matter of expediency, notably for Mr. Netanyahu, who believed his

reelection chances improved via a deal with the Syrian government. In other cases, there are elements of duplicity – specifically, hiding planned concessions knowing their unpopularity with the voters. Yossi Beilin, one of Mr. Barak's ministers, admitted during the Camp David II summit that he and others in the government had earlier concealed their willingness to divide Jerusalem. "We didn't speak about this in the election campaign, because we knew that the public would not like it."

But expediency and duplicity are just part of the story. In addition, sincere aspirations inspire Israeli prime ministers to abandon strong policies for weak ones. Here we leave the political domain and enter the psychological one. Being prime minister of Israel, a country surrounded by enemies, is a weighty one. It is only too easy for the officeholder, having been elected leader of his people, immodestly to believe that he has a special talent to resolve his country's great, abiding, and potentially fatal problem, that of Arab hostility.

Not for this great man is it enough to plug away at the dull, slow, expensive, and passive policy of deterrence, hoping some distant day to win Arab acceptance. His impatience invariably leads in the same direction – to move things faster, to develop solutions, and to "take chances for peace."

If the prime minister's initiative succeeds, he wins international acclaim and enters the Jewish history books. If it fails – well, it was worth the try and his successors can clean up the mess.

Grandiosity and egoism, ultimately, explain the prime ministerial pattern of going soft. This brings to mind how, for centuries, French kings and presidents have bequeathed grand construction projects in Paris as their personal mark on history. In like spirit, Israeli prime ministers have since 1992 dreamed of bequeathing a grand diplomatic project.

The problem is, these are undemocratic impulses that betray the electorate, undermine faith in government, and erode Israel's position. These negative trends will continue until Israelis elect a modest prime minister.

Alice's Middle East

By Barry Rubin *The Jerusalem Post* July 1, 2004

The Middle East has supplied new evidence that it is the real-life equivalent of the Alice in Wonderland world. Consider these developments, both serious and farcical:

A few months ago, France, Britain, and Germany proudly announced their agreement with Iran that would allegedly stop Teheran developing nuclear weapons. They would help Iran build nuclear energy for peaceful purposes in exchange for Iran stopping its program.

Why Iran needs nuclear power plants when these have been discredited elsewhere in the world (Italy is closing down all its reactors; the Chernobyl meltdown of a reactor was a major catastrophe) and it has huge oil and gas reserves is, of course, an interesting question.

One French parliamentarian announced that the deal proved the European policy of compromise was superior to the American strategy of confrontation. Now Iran has announced it will resume building

equipment that makes it possible to develop nuclear weapons in a way that openly breaks the agreement. (What it is doing secretly no doubt goes well beyond this.)

Will Europe now spring into action to fight Iran's plans?

The death toll in Iraq continues to rise as insurgents prove three things: They are quite willing to wreck the country in order to seize power; while they complain about the US occupation, they seem determined to make sure it is harder to end; while they claim to want an independent Iraq, they are doing everything possible to sabotage the creation of such an entity.

Readers are free to draw parallels to other, similar situations in the region.

Former President Bill Clinton's autobiography completely bears out the account of Camp David and the collapse of the peace process put forward by this writer and others. Yasser Arafat's refusal to make peace was the cause of the problem. Foolish or dishonest people will no doubt continue to promulgate the idea that the failure was Israel's, but they have no interest in the evidence anyway.

Clinton did, however, criticize former prime minister Ehud Barak for not accepting a Syrian offer that if he went with Damascus's view of where the border should be, it would consider revising the precise line of demarcation.

Syria was demanding territory on the Sea of Galilee – something it never possessed legally in the post-1948 border. That would have let it claim half the lake and endangered Israel strategically.

There is a problem, borne out by Israel's experience, in agreeing in principle to a dangerous demand, the implication being that some compromise will be made later. Barak was right to reject this proposition.

Most of the world believes the Palestinians are fighting only because they want an end to Israel's presence in the West Bank and Gaza Strip as well as a state of their own. Were this true the conflict would have ended long ago, certainly in the year 2000.

Now still another poll shows the sad truth. According to surveys taken by the Jerusalem Media and Communication Center, whose head is a minister in Arafat's cabinet, 45 percent of Palestinians believe that the intifada's goal is to wipe Israel off the map, while 42 percent see the immediate goal as only forcing Israel out of the West

Bank and Gaza Strip (which does not prevent a second round to get the rest).

Sixty-five percent favor continued violence against all Israeli targets.

Meanwhile, a poll by Bir-Zeit University's Development Studies Program shows that 54 percent doubt a Palestinian state could coexist with Israel even if there was a comprehensive peace treaty, while 38 percent favor coexistence. Sixty-one percent advocate continued armed struggle even if Israel pulls out of all Gaza.

Apologists argue that the poll's timing – during a period of relatively high violence – explains these results, but the outcome is consistent with earlier surveys. Apologists also claim that if Israel showed it wanted peace, the numbers would change dramatically.

But why should this happen if Palestinians continue to be told by their leaders, preachers, activists, and media that all-out struggle is necessary and total victory is both possible and the only proper patriotic and Muslim policy?

If Israel withdraws from all of the Gaza Strip and dismantles all the Jewish settlements there, will this spark some change of heart on the Palestinian side?

Last week I turned on my radio and got a shock. A BBC official was insisting that the network was tough on Israel. He concluded, "We are not pro-Israel. We are not anti-Palestinian."

Was this some kind of BBC admission of bias? Alas, it was a defense against demands for even more anti-Israel bias!

A left-wing media center claimed the British media were slanted in Israel's favor. For years researchers with well-documented cases about anti-Israel bias in the British media have been ignored, ridiculed, and kept out of the media.

Now radio programs and newspaper columns are thrown open to those insisting that the media is pro-Israel, with no equal time for the other side. What better proof could there be of the real bias and misrepresentation that is going on?

All this is happening when it is clear that the intifada has failed to win a victory. Yet there is no sign – nor will there be as long as Arafat lives – of any change in this losing strategy.

The writer is director of the Global Research in International Affairs Center.

The Focus on Israel was on vacation for the last two weeks and relocated to the wilds of Alaska, but we are now back in business! Please send us any appropriate stories to sheldonb@rsfchart.com.

Culture Shock in a British Classroom

By Emma Goldman The New York Jewish Week May 21, 2004

It had been a long yet uneventful day at the Oxford High School for Girls. I staggered into art class after surviving a boring video in history on the Berlin airlift. Being less than a stellar artist, I assumed my regular inconspicuous position in the corner of the room, and looked forward to a relaxing 40 minutes of listening to the radio and kvetching candy wrappers.

Since February I had been a student at this exclusive British school while my father undertook a fellowship at the enter for Hebrew and Jewish Studies at Oxford University. Oxford High was a far cry from my regular school, Ramaz Upper School in Manhattan, in many ways.

Most notably, after living on the Jewishly dense Upper West Side, where synagogues are as numerous as Starbucks, I was now one of three Jewish students in a school of about 640. So I was regarded as the resident Jewish scholar; I was even called to the chalkboard by my religious studies teacher to provide the correct spelling or such concepts as "mitzvot" and list the correct order of the Ten Commandments.

Comments such as "I reckon, you don't look very Jewish. Most Jewish girls have big noses and Afros," and people's ignorance of Jewish belief shocked me. I also noticed that when suicide bombings had occurred in Israel, one of the students or teachers mentioned it in our daily assemblies, and the front pages of the British newspapers had pictures of big-breasted women instead of news of the assault.

In school, when our teacher asked us to provide a list of the greatest tragedies in history, not one student offered the Holocaust as an example. Even more stunning, when I suggested the Holocaust, the teacher didn't even write it on the board. Apparently the death of 6 million of my extended family didn't qualify as a tragedy.

Ironically, far away from my Jewish school, my synagogue, my Jewish friends and family, I had an experience that made me feel more Jewish than I had ever felt.

I wasn't in the mood for conversation that day in art class, yet the one taking place right next to me was impossible to ignore. "So did you hear about what happened in Israel yesterday?" one girl asked, turning to her neighbor. Her friend shook her head absentmindedly. "Apparently the Israelis killed one of the Palestinian spiritual leaders, a poor holy man in a wheelchair. Unbelievable," she sighed.

Her neighbor suddenly became concerned.

"Are you serious?" she responded, her voice dripping with horror.

"I know! How dare the Israelis do something like that ...that's real terrorism," replied the first girl.

The "holy man" was Sheik Yassin, the brutal mastermind of Hamas, responsible for the deaths of hundreds of innocent Israelis. The recent bombing of the No. 19 bus in Jerusalem, which killed high school students just like my classmate, did not classify as "terrorism." Israeli infants shot by Palestinian gunmen was not "terrorism." The assassination of a murderer, however, strangely was.

Though I had sat silently through countless previous incidents where stupid comments were made conveying sympathy for the "desperation" of the Palestinian suicide bombers, I could not be quiet in the face of this perversion of reality.

"Excuse me," I intervened. "Did you just call the leader of Hamas a holy man? Do you have any clue what you are talking about?"

Naively, I thought I would be able to explain to her that Yassin was a terrorist who killed hundreds of Israeli civilians and Israel's decision to kill him was not an act of terrorism but defense. That Israel went after him just as America is going after Osama bin Laden.

I assumed that we shared a common view of current events and the recent history of the Middle East. Again naively, I expected compassion for the ongoing deaths of Israeli civilians and anger at those who carried out the attacks. My assumptions could not have been more wrong.

From the founding of the State of Israel, which my classmate viewed as the Israelis stripping the Palestinians of their homeland, to the suicide bombings, which she saw as legitimate acts of desperation, to her obliviousness of the historic claim of the Jewish people to the land of Israel, it was as if we came from different planets. What's more, instead of considering my point of view, she was utterly dismissive.

She believed Israel was an evil empire that had to be obliterated. The Palestinian murderers were freedom fighters. And Hamas was not a terrorist organization but a religious organization now deprived of its "spiritual leader."

Body shaking, tears threatening to pour out, I found myself arguing passionately in defense of Israel. While I was aware of the bias in the British media and had seen anti-Israel rallies on the Columbia University campus, this threat had never come so close to me before.

Soon after this experience, I had the good fortune to spend several weeks in Israel, where I felt a sense of belonging and happiness. While I have always loved being in Israel, my connection to this land suddenly seems more important and special.

And I will no longer take for granted the amazing, all-enveloping Jewish life I am able to lead in

Manhattan.

Death of an Intifada

By Isabel Kirshner The Jerusalem Report June 14, 2004

In the West Bank city of Tul Karm, everyone from Yasser Arafat's governor to the remnants of the Al-Aqsa Brigades says the Palestinian uprising is as good as over

Hani Aweideh looks like he hasn't quite grown into his new role as a militia leader. Clean-cut with neatly coiffed hair, pressed beige jeans and a matching polo shirt with embroidered trim around the collar, the only thing that distinguishes this 26-year-old from the ordinary young men of Tul Karm is the AK-47 he brings with him when he emerges out of hiding for an afternoon rendezvous in an anonymous downtown store.

Aweideh handles the gun awkwardly, though with obvious reverence, asking for a plastic bag to hide it in for the short hop from the backseat of a car into the store. Not long ago Aweideh and his comrades from the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades -- the armed cells, affiliated with Yasser Arafat's Fatah movement, that sprung up with the intifada -- would have been swaggering through the streets of this West Bank market town, inspiring admiration in some residents, terrorizing others and plotting what they call "military operations" against nearby Jewish settlements or Israeli cities that lie over the Green Line, the pre-1967 border that skirts Tul Karm to the west.

But the armed men are not walking around here anymore, certainly not in broad daylight. The few of them left after the army's frequent raids, targeted killings and arrests are said to be feeling hunted and alone. And while predictions of calm times ahead may be premature, many here are already declaring Tul Karm's intifada over.

"Everybody's either dead or in prison," says Nidal Jallad, who is hanging around the store shortly before Aweideh makes his entry. "It's over. We've had enough. All we want now is for the prisoners to come home." One of Nidal's brothers, a Hamas activist, was caught in March 2003 transporting an explosive belt from Nablus in a car with three others, including the would-be suicide bomber. He is now serving a 17-year sentence in Beersheba jail. Another brother, Nidal says, was shot by an Israeli army sniper during a curfew and is just starting to walk again after four operations. Nidal claims his brother was only outside because soldiers had taken him from his house, dropped him off near the hospital, then ordered him to walk home.

Nidal is the cousin of Malik Jallad, known as Jarira, the last commander of the Tul Karm Qata'eb, or Brigades, who was captured four months ago. When Aweideh comes in, he introduces himself as Jarira's successor, though other local sources say the arrested leader hasn't been replaced. There's nobody left of the serious hard core of the Brigades, they say, only the remnants of Jarira's junior lieutenants such as Aweideh inside the city and "a few thieves" in the two local refugee camps. The mounting tensions between the city and camp militants have turned them more into rivals than brothers-in-arms.

Aweideh, who used to work in a picture framer's shop, insists that there is still an intifada in Tul Karm. "Only two days ago soldiers opened fire on one of our guys," he notes, adding that 10 days ago there were six more "martyrs" from the Qata'eb in the Nur Shams camp adjacent to the town. But ultimately his protests only serve to confirm what the others are saying. Asked what exactly the Qata'eb want, he replies: "All we want now is to defend ourselves. That's it. Nobody is giving us any hope or any security."

Residents of Tul Karm are no longer willing to provide refuge for the armed men in their houses, local sources say, for fear of ending up on the army's demolition list. Furthermore Aweideh, his fingers nervously drumming on the back of his chair, an eye fixed on the door, reveals that it is not only the Israeli actions that are curbing the militants. "The Palestinian Authority used to support us, but we've had no funding from them for the past two months," he claims. "They make promises, but nothing ever materializes. The PA wants to calm the situation, but Sharon doesn't," he concludes.

Hiding has become the armed men's main preoccupation, since the apparently inexperienced Aweideh attests to "100 per-cent difficulty" in launching attacks. The last local operation took place in early April when a gunman from the Tul Karm refugee camp infiltrated the nearby Avnei Hefetz settlement fatally shooting Ya'acov Zaga, 40, and wounding his teenage daughter. The gunman, 18-year-old Ramzi Arda, was killed by soldiers during the incident, though an accomplice who had driven him there got away.

Tul Karm is known much more as a Fatah bastion than as a stronghold of Hamas, though posters of Hamas leader Sheikh Ahmed Yassin and his short-lived successor Abd al-Aziz Rantisi, killed

in Israeli strikes in Gaza, are plastered up all over town. Both Hamas and Islamic Jihad claimed responsibility for the Avnei Hefetz attack, saying it was in retaliation for Yassin's assassination in March.

Aweideh attributes the difficulty in launching attacks to the recently constructed security barrier that now seals Tul Karm off from Israel, as well as the strict checkpoint regime that controls movement between the city and the rest of the West Bank and "the pressure put on us by the PA." He says that the people he deals with in Ramallah "are scared for Arafat" following Prime Minister Sharon's veiled threats on the Palestinian leader's life.

About a dozen of Aweideh's friends have been killed. Asked if he's afraid, he points a finger upwards, lifts his eyes to the ceiling and says he'd like to join them.

Tul Karm, a city of 90,000 -- or over 130,000 including the two refugee camps -- figures prominently in the annals of the intifada. Israel launched its "targeted killing" of intifada leaders here when army snipers shot down Thabet Thabet in the last days of 2000. Thabet, a dentist and a local Fatah leader who was well known to the Israeli peace camp as a political dialogue partner, had allegedly become a conduit for funding the Qata'eb network. "He was involved in everything," says Aweideh admiringly. Abd al-Bassat Odeh, the Hamas suicide bomber who carried out the Park Hotel Passover attack in Netanyahu in March 2002, killing 30, also came from the city. That bombing precipitated Israel's massive Defensive Shield operation that saw the army reinvade all the Palestinian cities of the West Bank.

The Tul Karm refugee camp produced Sirhan Sirhan, the 19-year-old gunman who killed five Israelis at Kibbutz Metzger in November 2002, including a mother and her two boys, aged four and five. Tul Karm was also the hometown of Raed Karmi, one of the Al-Aqsa Brigades' most charismatic leaders in the West Bank who was alleged to be responsible for the deaths of at least nine Israelis, including two who were abducted from a Tul Karm café and executed in retaliation for Thabet's death. Karmi was killed in an explosion widely attributed to Israel in early 2002, an event that brought a tentative three-week cease-fire called by Arafat to an end. (The PA was supposed to have been holding Karmi in custody at the time.)

Izz Al-Din Sharif, Arafat's personal envoy in Tul Karm, has been the governor of the district since the fall of 1996 when the Israelis withdrew under the terms of the Oslo Accords. Together with the surrounding villages, the population of the district is some 245,000. One of the "outsiders" who returned from exile with Arafat, Sharif had helped form Fatah's Al-Yarmuk force in Syria in the 1970s, and later moved on to PLO headquarters in Tunis where

he worked with the legendary Khalil Wazir (Abu Jihad). When he first came here he says he found the place in a dilapidated mess.

"There were no water wells, there were 90 children to a classroom, there was one hospital from Ottoman times and no clinics in the villages, and the market was flooded with rotten canned food past its legal expiry date," he recalls.

A small, lean man with a trim mustache and dancing eyebrows, he describes how things began to transform. Police and security forces were trained and deployed on the streets, a security plan was created for the whole region, committees were formed to deal with education, health and the rotten food, the Japanese started building a new hospital, the United Nations Development Program and the Europeans helped improve the water system and the foreign donor-funded Palestinian Economic Council for Development and Reconstruction started paving the roads.

"Commerce prospered and the city was flourishing," Sharif enthuses, in Arabic. "And we were also fighting terrorism. We started meeting with the Israeli army and solving all the problems at the table. At the weekends, Tul Karm was full of Israeli families who used to come and shop. Here everything is cheaper and better. The Jews would return home with wide smiles on their faces. The years from 1996 until 2000," when the intifada erupted, "were a golden era for us."

Although the intifada started under the premiership of Ehud Barak -- and Thabet, who Sharif describes as "a man of peace" who was "trying to organize the armed men and the illegal weapons" was killed on Barak's watch -- Sharif blames Sharon for the escalation. Ignoring questions about where all the armed militants suddenly appeared from, he says that Sharon set about destroying all that had been built in order to set the Palestinian state back another 50 years. Now, he says, Tul Karm has become a "social case" with about 60 percent of the population living below the poverty line. "There are 248 martyrs from the Tul Karm area, 25,000 wounded, a third in wheelchairs," he rattles off. "These are the latest figures that have stuck in my mind." Between 18,000-22,000 Palestinians from this district used to go to work in Israel. "Now they are living on charity," Sharif says.

Economically, the city is barely functioning. Everybody owes money to everybody else, judging by what they say. The younger members of the unemployed are going back to school, while 70 percent of the college graduates can't find a job. The coffee shops are full of bored men who have nowhere else to go. "If you shake them, you'll find they haven't got two shekels in their pockets," says a local businessman. Nobody can pay their electricity

bills, he adds, and the PA tax collectors don't even dare come looking.

Nidal Jallad, who says he works with the PA security forces, is also one of 12 partners who opened a garden restaurant near the Tul Karm Town Hall during the good years of the mid-90s. It's been closed for the past three years and only operates as a mourning venue "to receive condolence calls for martyrs," he says. "Many people still come. We offer them food. They can't pay but we serve them anyway."

In a sign of the times, a recent headline on the local TV station was not about any Al-Aqsa Brigade action, but the fact that a certain chain of stores was selling ground coffee at 18 shekels a kilo rather than the usual 20.

"There is no intifada in Tul Karm. The army is still arresting people on the pretext that they are planning attacks, but they are liars," the governor rasps.

Some of the blood that has been spilled here in recent years has been the result of internal strife, as the militants take revenge against local Palestinians accused of having helped the Israeli authorities track their colleagues down. During Jarira's reign, three alleged collaborators from one of the refugee camps were executed outside the city morgue, to save the trouble of having to transport the bodies. And in August 2002, Akhlas Khouli, a mother of seven, was shot dead, followed by her niece. Khouli was accused of having planted the bomb that killed Raed Karmi on behalf of the Israelis, and of passing on information about the whereabouts of another senior Al-Aqsa Brigades member who was assassinated.

"People are so poor, they will agree to collaborate for very little in return," notes a local who says he was present at some of the alleged collaborators' confessions. Khouli's niece is said to

have agreed to help in return for the promise of a cell phone card -- which she never even received.

More recently, though, militants from the Tul Karm camp are said to have abducted an alleged collaborator, taped his confession, then let him go in return for a ransom of 80,000 shekels (\$18,000). The freed man is said to have taken refuge inside Israel.

Now, Governor Sharif suggests that Israel should stay out of Tul Karm and that his forces should be allowed to assume control. Shortly before the interview in his first floor office, an army jeep was seen idling inside Tul Karm, not far from the town center, and locals say the soldiers enter the city every night. A few uniformed PA police are visible on the streets, but they are not armed and they are confined to dealing with civilian matters like traffic and petty crime. In the absence of orders from Sharif's "close friend" Arafat, nobody expects that they will go after the militants themselves. All Sharif will say on the matter is that "security for Israel can only be achieved at the negotiating table. When we get the right to live, then we'll give them the right. Israel wants a leadership of spies, of yes-men," he goes on, adding that Arafat "says he'd prefer to die a hundred times than to be a collaborator."

After 15 minutes at the store, Hani Aweideh looks like he wants to be on his way before the army gets wind that he's out and about. Now that Tul Karm is relatively quiet, I ask him, if Israel were to stop its operations here, would you agree to do the same? "We'll stop our operations," he says, "but we won't hand over our weapons. Not to Israel, nor to the PA."

The AK-47 goes back in the plastic bag, and Aweideh speeds off again. Everyone in the store breathes a sigh of relief. Nowadays, around these parts, the novice militia leader seems to be viewed as more of a liability than a hero.

Kerry plays bad policy, good politics on Israel

By Zev Chafetz The New York Daily News June 27, 2004

Congress voted overwhelmingly last week to affirm the Bush revolution in Middle East policy. On Wednesday, by a 407-9 vote, the House "strongly endorsed" two promises made by the President to Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in a letter of April 14: 1) The U.S. agrees that it is "unrealistic" for Israel to pull back to the pre-1967 lines and dismantle its major West Bank settlements, and 2) the U.S. does not expect Israel to resettle Palestinian refugees.

The next day, the Senate passed a similar nonbinding resolution. The vote was 95 to 3.

The Bush doctrine, now ratified by both houses of Congress, radically alters more than 30 years of American Middle Eastern diplomacy. It puts the U.S., for the first time, flatly on the Israeli side of the post-Six-Day War dispute. Not surprisingly, Sharon hailed this as "a great day in the history of Israel."

Only three senators voted against the pro-Israel resolution: ex-Klansman Robert Byrd of West Virginia, John Sununu of New Hampshire and independent James Jeffords of Vermont. Richard Lugar of Indiana, the chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee, skipped the ballot. So did only one other senator: John Kerry. He was in California.

Why did Kerry absent himself? He had some commitments on the West Coast - meeting with retired auto exec Lee Iacocca, taking a bow at a Hollywood fund-raising concert - nothing he couldn't have skipped to cast a vote on America's new Israel policy.

No, Kerry ducked out because he didn't want to be there. His no-show conveyed a tacit but unmistakable message of dissent.

President Bush's tilt toward Israel is very unpopular in Old Europe, among American foreign policy establishmentarians and in the Naderite wing of the Democratic Party. All three constituencies matter very much to Kerry. His Senate no-show signals to them that a Kerry administration wouldn't be bound by his predecessor's promises or policies.

This may seem politically courageous. In fact, it is not.

True, support for Israel is widespread in the U.S. - last week's margins in the House and Senate make that plain. But those for whom it is the key issue will undoubtedly vote for Bush. No American President (hell, no Israeli president) has ever been such an ardent Zionist.

For run-of-the-mill pro-Israel Americans, Kerry is supportive enough. Democratic Jews (the party's

main Israel constituency) aren't really all that concerned about details. They can live with a return to the "evenhandedness" of the Clinton-Gore years. After all, even Jimmy Carter, who was downright unfriendly to Israel, got around 60% of the Jewish vote in 1980. Kerry can expect considerably more than that.

That's why the accusation that Bush's pro-Israel policies are politically inspired - a charge made most recently by Sen. Ernest Hollings (D-S.C.) - are absurd. Sure, Sharon's blessing may do the Republicans some good in Miami or Borough Park, Brooklyn. But there simply aren't enough "Israel first" votes to change the outcome of an election.

George Bush knows this. So does John Kerry. That's why the senator could afford to punt on Thursday. It won't hurt him politically, and it broadens his options if he's elected.

President Kerry will be able to shift back to a more "evenhanded" approach to the Middle East conflict without being accused of flip-flopping. After all, on the day the Senate voted to ratify Bush's promises to Israel, Kerry just happened to be 3,000 miles away.

In Allah's Name?

By Naomi Schaefer Riley *The Wall Street Journal* June 25, 2004

"At best, it's vigilantism. At worst it's anarchy. Islam is against both." That was the reaction of Daniel McBride to the recent beheadings of South Korean Kim Sun Il and Americans Paul Johnson and Nicholas Berg. Mr. McBride, a spokesman for the Islamic Center of Boca Raton, Fla., wants to make clear that "for these radicals to even imply that what they're doing is Islamically correct is wrong."

Many Muslims are disturbed that such acts of terrorism are being committed in the name of their religion. The Council on American-Islamic Relations launched a petition a few weeks ago that notes: "We, the undersigned Muslims wish to state clearly that those who commit acts of terror, murder, and cruelty in the name of Islam are not only destroying innocent lives, but also betraying the values of the faith they claim to represent."

Mohammad Tariq Sherwani, the director of the Muslim Center in Flushing, N.Y., signed the petition because he was concerned that "lots of times, Muslims don't speak up against violence." He expressed special sadness about the death of Paul Johnson. "That gentleman in Saudi Arabia. He was so honest. He lived there for years. He trusted the people. He was killed by the people he trusted."

Kareem Irfan, chairman of the Council of Islamic Organizations in Greater Chicago, cites the

"strong traditions of the prophet Muhammad, which require dealings based on compassion, tolerance and mercy, even with military engagement." He emphasizes: "With civilians, there is no possible justification [for mistreatment] in the Koran or the actions of the Prophet."

That the terrorists were chanting "God is great" while executing Nicholas Berg is particularly disturbing for Yassir Fazaga, the imam at the Orange County Islamic Foundation in Mission Viejo, Calif. "As if that gives you an OK, that what you're doing is the will of God....It's a disgrace."

So why are these radicals invoking Islam? Imam Fazaga believes that, in addition to trying to add legitimacy to their actions, they are using the religious justification to recruit more members. Mr. McBride believes the radicals are trying to intimidate the enemy. "If you said to Americans, 100 guys are doing this, the Americans would say hunt them down and kill them," but now Americans think a whole religion is against them.

At bottom, though, Mr. Irfan believes that the beheadings simply demonstrate "a primordial sense of retaliation and revenge." Mr. Sherwani is careful to note that "two wrongs don't make a right." Even the prison abuse at Abu Ghraib "doesn't make it right."

These Muslim leaders agree that, along with the victims' being innocent of any crimes, their executioners had no right under Muslim law to try or punish them. Islamic law does allow capital punishment and prescribes beheading in some cases of rape or murder, but as Omar Abu-Namouf, imam of the Islamic Cultural Center of New York, notes: "Only the authorities are entitled to impose punishment, not ordinary individuals."

This is where the issue gets more difficult for some Muslim leaders in America. "Who is qualified to set themselves up as a legitimate tribunal to cast the death penalty?" asks Rashad Sharif, the imam of the Masjid Al-Mu'minin, in Memphis, Tenn. In a world where certain governments "refuse to recognize international courts," he believes that it is hard to say who is legitimate and who is not. Indeed, Imam Sharif refuses to explicitly condemn the beheadings. "When I hear about someone cut in two pieces, I think about how we [Americans] blow up people into more pieces than can be put back together."

As disturbing as Imam Sharif's message of moral equivalence seems, it points to a larger question. Why aren't Muslim leaders who denounce

the beheadings willing to speak out against others who take the law into their own hands? Like the suicide bombers in Israel, for instance?

Toward the end of our conversation, Mr. Sherwani mentions his belief that "Israel is doing the same thing to Palestinians as Hitler did to the Jews." The implication seems to be that in the face of such oppression, such a response is legitimate.

And what about the various countries, like Nigeria, that are slowly implementing Sharia, or Islamic law, which sanctions the amputation of limbs for robbery or stoning to death for adultery? Are they legitimate authorities? Mr. Sherwani can only assure me that "if there is one totally Islamic state, you will see justice."

That Islam permits some extreme punishments, says Kareem Irfan, is almost beside the point. To carry them out, he maintains, you must reach "what the Western system would consider unmeetable thresholds of evidence." Better, he says, that Muslims follow the Koran's "exhortation to first consider forgiving."

Ms. Riley's book, "God on the Quad," will be published by St. Martin's in January.

The Situation in Gaza

By The Washington Times Editorial July 8, 2004

Despite intense opposition from within his hawkish Likud Party, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon is forging ahead with his plan to unilaterally withdraw Israeli settlements from Gaza. Under that plan, actual evacuation of Gaza settlements would begin by March. Since Mr. Sharon persuaded his cabinet to approve the Gaza pullout on June 6, he has lost his Knesset majority and shattered his relationship with nationalist settlers who have been his staunchest supporters for more than a quarter-century. Leading advocates of settlements in the Sharon cabinet have either resigned or been fired by the prime minister, whose party retains less than half of the 120 seats in the Knesset. For now, Mr. Sharon's political survival likely will depend in part on the Labor Party, headed by his political arch-rival Shimon Peres. How long such an uneasy political marriage will last is unknowable.

While Mr. Sharon has decided to risk his political future on pulling out of Gaza, similar statesmanship has not been in evidence on the Palestinian side. Working in tandem with Syria, for example, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad and other rejectionist groups have harshly denounced Egypt for attempting to work out security arrangements that would prevent Gaza from descending further into chaos following an Israeli pullout. To stabilize the situation in Gaza, Egypt is attempting to reduce

the number of Palestinian security organizations, most of them heavily armed groups, accountable to no one, who are affiliated with competing factions in Palestinian Authority (PA) Chairman Yasser Arafat's Fatah movement. At present, there are estimated to be anywhere from nine to 12 of these groups operating in Gaza. Egypt is attempting to persuade the Palestinians to reduce this number to three. Although Palestinian Prime Minister Ahmed Korei supports this Egyptian initiative, he is powerless to stop Mr. Arafat from torpedoing Egypt's effort to facilitate a Palestinian withdrawal.

Right now, Cairo is focused on persuading Mr. Arafat not to sabotage its efforts. Although Mr. Arafat has said publicly that he will cooperate, he has made similar declarations in the past, while working behind the scenes to foment violence and prevent Israeli-Palestinian negotiations from succeeding. Veteran U.S. peace negotiator Dennis Ross, who has perhaps more personal experience negotiating with Mr. Arafat than any other American, suggests that Mr. Arafat may try the same thing once again in Gaza. To deter him from sabotaging Israel's disengagement from Gaza, the Egyptian government must make it clear to Mr. Arafat that it will do something it has been loath to do in the past: go public with criticisms of his efforts to wreck the peace process.