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The end of the 'guilty Israeli'

Empathy has become a victim of the Palestinian attacks from Gaza.

By Yossi Klein Halevi

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JERUSALEM — Within the coming weeks, the Israeli army may re-invade the Gaza Strip in an attempt to stop the rocket attacks on Israeli towns and, perhaps, topple its Islamist Hamas government. If it happens, it will have come after long hesitation and anguished debate. Even we Israelis who once wanted nothing more than to leave Gaza forever now realize that we may have no choice but to return, at least until relative quiet is restored to our border.

In the early 1990s, while serving as a reservist soldier in Gaza, I became a guilty Israeli. By day, my unit patrolled the refugee camps where sewage flowed in rivulets and old men stared with hatred and children with despair. By night, we entered bedrooms and retrieved suspects whose offenses ranged from membership in terror organizations to failure to pay a water bill. More policemen than soldiers, we found ourselves enforcing an occupation whose threat to Israel's Jewish and democratic values had become unbearable.

Those were the years of the first intifada, the Palestinian uprising, and its great victory was the creation of a substantial bloc of guilt-ridden Israelis ready to take almost any risk for peace. As the Oslo peace process came into being under Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, the guilty Israeli became the most potent source of Palestinian empowerment. Many Israelis tried to understand for the first time how Palestinians experienced the conflict, in effect borrowing Palestinian eyes and incorporating elements of the Palestinian narrative into our own understanding of history.

By the end of the 1990s, a majority of Israelis were considering previously unthinkable concessions such as uprooting Jewish settlements in the West Bank and Gaza and redividing the city of Jerusalem. We moved in this direction anxiously. The Palestinians were already beginning to lose the goodwill of guilty Israelis by then. Under the leadership of Yasser Arafat, their media, schools and mosques inculcated a culture of denial that rejects the most basic truths of Jewish history, from our ancient roots in the land of Israel to the veracity of the Holocaust. Arafat was a fraud -- a master of linguistic duplicity, speaking peace in English to foreign journalists while using the language of jihad in Arabic to his own people. Other Palestinian leaders, including those perceived as moderates in the West, adopted a similar approach.

Nevertheless, despite a growing Israeli sense that we had been deceived, in December 2000, Israel accepted President Clinton's plan to establish a contiguous Palestinian state on almost all of the territories, with East Jerusalem as its capital.

Arafat's counteroffer was four years of suicide bombings -- the second Palestinian intifada, which lasted from 2000 to 2004. He and his apologists tried to pass it off as a spontaneous uprising in reaction to a controversial visit by then-Likud party leader Ariel Sharon to the Temple Mount, but Israelis understood that escalating violence had been Arafat's fallback plan all along.

Even after that bitter experience, Israelis still felt so desperate to end the occupation that they withdrew their army and uprooted their settlements from Gaza in 2006. Had Gazans begun at this point to create a peaceful state from their new, self-governing territory, the Israeli public almost

certainly would have endorsed substantive negotiations over a West Bank withdrawal. Instead, they elected a government led by Hamas, whose theology calls for the destruction of Israel and war against Jews around the world, and whose terror attacks are small pre-enactments of its genocidal ambitions. Palestinian rocket attacks that had previously been aimed at settlements were simply redirected toward towns and villages within Israel.

The result of all this is that today the guilty Israeli has become nearly extinct. Just as we came to realize during the first intifada that the occupation was untenable, so we have now come to realize that peace is impossible with Palestinian leaders for whom reconciliation is a one-way process.

So far, the rockets aimed at Israel have been primitive and mostly terrorize and wound rather than slaughter. But it is only a matter of time before Hamas' allies in Iran and Hezbollah upgrade the rockets' lethal effect. Meanwhile, the psychological damage has been profound: Israelis perceive their government's failure to defend southern Israel as a collapse of national sovereignty. The political fallout has been no less intense: Gaza was a test case for Israeli withdrawal, and the experiment was a disaster. How, Israelis wonder, can we evacuate the West Bank and risk rocket attacks on Tel Aviv and Jerusalem?

The rockets, though, are only a symptom of a deeper malaise: the willingness of Palestinian leaders to encourage their own people's suffering for political ends. Despite billions of dollars in foreign aid, successive Palestinian governments have done almost nothing to rehabilitate the nearly 60-year-old refugee camps. During a visit I paid to Gaza in the late 1990s, a U.N. official explained to me why. The fate of the refugees, he said, was being left to negotiations. When I asked whether he really believed that Israel would absorb Palestinian refugees, he replied: "All options are open."

In fact, they are not. No Israeli government will agree to commit demographic suicide by allowing hundreds of thousands of Palestinians to move into Israel proper. Under any two-state peace agreement, descendants of those refugees who left Israel in 1948 will have the right to return to a Palestinian state, not the Jewish state.

Gaza's people are being held hostage to a political fantasy. And the international community is abetting the tragedy. The U.N. actually considers Palestinians to be permanent refugees, to be protected in squalid but subsidized camps even though they live in their own homeland of Gaza, under their own government.

So long as Gaza refuses to heal itself, Israelis will rightly suspect that the Palestinian goal remains Israel's destruction. Not even a full withdrawal from the West Bank, they fear, will end the war, any more than the pullout from Gaza stopped the rockets. Israel's crime isn't occupying but existing.

And so we move toward the next terrible round of conflict. This time, though, for all our anguish, we will feel a lot less remorse. Because even guilty Israelis realize that, until our neighbors care more about building their state than undermining ours, the misery of Gaza will persist.

Yossi Klein Halevi is a senior fellow in the Adelson Institute for Strategic Studies of the Shalem Center in Jerusalem and author of "At the Entrance to the Garden of Eden: A Jew's Search for Hope with Christians and Muslims in the Holy Land."