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## The Most Successful Terrorist of the 20th Century?

by URI AVNERY  
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Two former Prime Ministers of Israel are in the news these days. They represent two of the many faces of Israel.

They also raise a universal question: which is preferable – an honest fanatic or a corrupt pragmatist?

Yitzhak Shamir died two weeks ago and was buried in the cemetery of the “Great of the Nation” in Jerusalem. He was 97 years old and had been vegetating for years in a state of dementia. Most Israelis did not know that he was still alive.

When I described him on TV as “the most successful terrorist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century”, the interviewer raised his eyebrows. But it was an accurate description.

Shamir was not a great thinker. In his teens he joined the right-wing Zionist youth organization of Vladimir Jabotinsky in Poland, and since then he did not change his world-view one iota. In this respect he was absolutely immovable. He wanted a Jewish state in all of the historical country. Period. No nonsense about Arabs and such.

We both joined the Irgun underground at the same time. I was too young to take part in actual terrorist actions, he, eight years my senior, carried them out. At the time, the Irgun killed scores of Arab men, women and children in attacks on Arab markets, in retaliation for Arab attacks on Jewish civilians. We defied the policy of “self-restraint” ordered by the Zionist leadership.

In the summer of 1940 the Irgun split. One of the commanders, Avraham Stern, founded the organization known to the British as the “Stern Gang”. (Eventually it was called LEHI, acronym for Fighters for the Freedom of Israel.)

Stern was a logical person. The aim was to set up a Jewish state in all of Palestine. The enemy was the British Empire. The enemy of my enemy is my friend. Therefore we must cooperate with the Nazis. He sent several emissaries to contact the Germans. Some were intercepted by the British, the others were ignored by the Nazis.

I could not accept this atrocious logic and did not join, though the temptation was there. Shamir did.

He was caught and imprisoned (unlike Stern himself, who was caught and shot on the spot). Within a short time, virtually all the members of the organization were killed or arrested. The group ceased to exist – until Shamir and a colleague, Eliahu Giladi, broke out. The two acted together and brought LEHI to life again. One day Shamir had Giladi tried and shot.

Giladi was not accused of treason, but, on the contrary – of excessive zeal. He made plans for revolutionary actions, such as killing David Ben-Gurion and the entire Zionist leadership. Shamir decided that his adventurous nature endangered the organization and that he must be removed. Afterwards Shamir named his daughter Gilada.

Many years later I asked him which historical personality he admired most. He answered without hesitation: Lenin. I understood that he admired him because Lenin ruthlessly followed the maxim “the end justifies the means”.

Shamir was one of LEHI’s three leaders. He was responsible for operations and organization, meticulously building a deliberately small group of selected individuals, executing incredibly daring actions. He himself planned every single operation in the greatest detail. The most famous was the assassination of Lord Moyne, the senior British functionary in the Middle East, in Cairo.)

He was arrested again when the British shut down Tel Aviv and conducted a house-to-house search. Shamir was well disguised but could not hide his most obvious characteristic: he was very small, almost a dwarf, with a big, strong head. The soldiers were instructed to arrest every man below a certain height.

This time he was sent to a detention camp in Africa, from which he duly escaped. He reached French Djibouti, was brought by a French warship to Paris where he stayed until Israel came into being.

LEHI never amounted to more than a few hundred members. But it played a major role in driving the British out of this country.

In Israel, Shamir disappeared from view. For years he worked for the Mossad. It was rumored that his speciality was sending letter bombs. When he resurfaced, he joined the party of his erstwhile competitor, Menachem Begin. He was appointed Knesset chairman.

Once I decided to stage a small demonstration in the Knesset. I wore under my jacket a t-shirt saying “Peace is better than a Greater Israel”. During the plenary session I took the jacket off. After some minutes of shock, an usher asked me politely to see the chairman in his office. Shamir received me with a big smile and said: “Uri, where would we be if every member did something like that? Now that you have made your point, would you please put your jacket on again?” Which I did, of course.

When Begin made peace with Egypt and even I voted for him, Shamir abstained. After Lebanon War I, when Begin resigned saying “I can’t go on any more”, Shamir took his place.

As prime minister, his most outstanding achievement was to do nothing, except building settlements – quietly and unobtrusively. Under American pressure, he attended the Madrid peace conference, determined not to budge an inch. As he remarked later, he was quite ready to negotiate with the Arabs for any length of time.

He did not dream of making peace, which would have drawn frontiers and barred the way to Greater Israel. His ideology was summed up by his most famous dictum, alluding to the old adage that the Arabs want to throw the Jews into the sea: “The Arabs are the same Arabs and the sea is the same sea.” Another famous statement: “It is permissible to lie for the fatherland.”

Remarkably, this man, who joined the Irgun (like me) in protest against “self-restraint”, exercised self-restraint *par excellence* when Saddam Hussein rained missiles on Israel during the Gulf War. Shamir was content to let the Americans do the job.

His other great achievement was preventing Jews from reaching the US. When the Soviet leadership allowed Jews to emigrate, almost all of them proceeded straight to the US. Shamir persuaded the White House to shut the gates, and thus compelled more than a million Russian Jews to come to Israel (where they now swell the ranks of the extreme right.)

For a short time he was the mentor of the young Binyamin Netanyahu, but then he came to detest him. After Netanyahu made a small tactical concession to the Arabs, he called him “Angel of Destruction”. One may assume that he was also disgusted by Netanyahu’s penchant for luxury. When not lying for the fatherland, Shamir was straight as a ramrod, living in utmost modesty. There never was – or could be – even the slightest hint of corruption.

Which leads us straight to Ehud Olmert.

Once upon a time there was a Minister of Education, Zalman Aran, who was known for his dry humor. A party functionary once came up to him and said: “Ziama, you can congratulate me. I have been acquitted!”

“Strange,” Aran replied, “I have never been acquitted!”

Olmert has been acquitted many times. During his entire career, he has danced from one acquittal to the next.

This week it happened again. After a long trial, in which he was accused on five different counts of corruption, he was acquitted of four. One concerned his habit of letting himself be invited by several charity organizations to lecture in the US, and letting all of them pay separately for the same first class ticket (using the surplus for his family's private outings.) Another count: reporting to the State Comptroller that his collection of expensive pens was worth a tenth of its real value.

The district court decided to acquit him on all counts for lack of proof, except one: that as Minister of Industry he had favored the clients of his close friend, who obliged him by keeping a large amount of cash stashed away in his safe.

Olmert celebrated his partial acquittal as a great victory. The media – the same media which celebrated his indictment when it all started – are taking part in the celebration. He is still awaiting the outcome of an even bigger trial. The accusation, this time: taking bribes for the building of a huge multi-billion architectural monster in the center of Jerusalem when he was mayor of the city. Everybody expects that he will be acquitted, as usual.

Among the outcries against the Attorney General in the media was the accusation that he, a mere civil servant, had toppled an incumbent Prime Minister on trumped-up charges. Worse, that he had done so just when Olmert was about to make peace with the Palestinians.

Nonsense. In his years in the Prime Minister's office, during which he initiated two dirty wars (Lebanon War II and Operation "Cast Lead"), he had plenty of time to make peace. He did indeed produce a peace plan – but only on the eve of his expected political demise. With peacemakers like this, who needs warmongers?

However, Olmert is already hinting that after his next acquittal he will return to political life.

Shamir, the dead honest fanatic, has many followers. Olmert, the living corrupt pragmatist, has very few.

Netanyahu, their current successor, has the vices of both and the virtues of neither.