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The Atrocity

Where's the Outrage Over a Boy Burnt to Death?

by URI AVNERY
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Bombs are raining on Gaza and rockets on Southern Israel, people are dying and homes are being destroyed.

Again.

Again without any purpose. Again with the certainty that after it's all over, everything will essentially be the same as it was before.

But I can hardly hear the sirens which warn of rockets coming towards Tel Aviv. I cannot take my mind off the awful thing that happened in Jerusalem.

If a gang of neo-Nazis had kidnapped a 16-year old boy in a London Jewish neighborhood in the dark of the night, driven him to Hyde Park, beaten him up, poured gasoline into his mouth, doused him all over and set him on fire – what would have happened?

Wouldn't the UK have exploded in a storm of anger and disgust?

Wouldn't the Queen have expressed her outrage?

Wouldn't the Prime Minister have rushed to the home of the bereaved family to apologize on behalf of the entire nation?

Wouldn't the leadership of the neo-Nazis, their active supporters and brain-washers be indicted and condemned?

Perhaps in the UK. Perhaps in Germany.

Not here.

This abominable atrocity took place in Jerusalem. A Palestinian boy was abducted and burned alive. No racist crime in Israel ever came close to it.

Burning people alive is an abomination everywhere. In a state that claims to be "Jewish", it is even worse.

In Jewish history, only one chapter comes close to the Holocaust: the Spanish inquisition. This Catholic institution tortured Jews and burned them alive at the stake. Later, this happened sometimes in the Russian pogroms. Even the most fanatical enemy of Israel could not imagine such an awful thing happening in Israel. Until now.

Under Israeli law, East Jerusalem is not occupied territory. It is a part of sovereign Israel.

The chain of events was as follows:

Two Palestinians, apparently acting alone, kidnapped three Israeli teenagers who were trying to hitchhike at night from a settlement near Hebron. The objective was probably to use them as hostages for the release of Palestinian prisoners.

The action went awry when one of the three succeeded in calling the Israeli police emergency number from his mobile phone. The kidnapers, assuming that the police would soon be on their tracks, panicked and shot the three at once. They dumped the bodies in a field and fled. (Actually the police bungled things and only started their hunt the next morning.)

All of Israel was in an uproar. Many thousands of soldiers were employed for three weeks in the search for the three youngsters, combing thousands of buildings, caves and fields.

The public uproar was surely justified. But it soon degenerated into an orgy of racist incitement, which intensified from day to day. Newspapers, radio stations and TV networks competed with each other in unabashed racist diatribes, repeating the official line ad nauseam and adding their own nauseous commentary – every day, around the clock.

The security services of the Palestinian Authority, which collaborated throughout with the Israeli security services, played a major role in discovering early on the identity of the two kidnapers (identified but not yet caught). Mahmoud Abbas, the PA president, stood up in a meeting of the

Arab countries and condemned the kidnapping unequivocally and was branded by many of his own people as an Arab Quisling. Israeli leaders, on the other hand, called him a hypocrite.

Israel's leading politicians let loose a salvo of utterances which would be seen anywhere else as outright fascist. A short selection:

Danny Danon, deputy Minister of Defense: "If a Russian boy had been kidnapped, Putin would have flattened village after village!"

"Jewish Home" faction leader Ayala Shaked: "With a people whose heroes are child murderers we must deal accordingly." ("Jewish Home" is a part of the government coalition.)

Noam Perl, world chairman of Bnei Akiva, the youth movement of the settlers: "An entire nation and thousands of years of history demand: Revenge!"

Uri Bank, former secretary of Uri Ariel, Housing Minister and builder of the settlements: "This is the right moment. When our children are hurt, we go berserk, no limits, dismantling of the Palestinian Authority, annexation of Judea and Samaria (the West Bank), execution of all prisoners who have been condemned for murder, exile of family members of terrorists!"

And Binyamin Netanyahu himself, speaking about the entire Palestinian people: "They are not like us. We sanctify life, they sanctify death!"

When the bodies of the three were found by tourist guides, the chorus of hatred reached a new crescendo. Soldiers posted tens of thousands of messages on the internet calling for "revenge", politicians egged them on, the media added fuel, lynch mobs gathered in many places in Jerusalem to hunt Arab workers and rough them up.

Except for a few lonely voices, it seemed that all Israel had turned into a soccer mob, shouting "Death to the Arabs!"

Can anyone even imagine a present-day European or American crowd shouting "Death to the Jews?"

The six arrested until now for the bestial murder of the Arab boy had come straight from one of these "Death to the Arabs" demonstrations.

First they had tried to kidnap a 9-year old boy in the same Arab neighborhood, Shuafat. One of them caught the boy in the street and dragged him towards their car, choking him at the same time. Luckily, the child succeeded in shouting "Mama!" and his mother started hitting the kidnapper with her cell phone. He panicked and ran off. The choking marks on the boy's neck could be seen for several days.

The next day the group returned, caught Muhammad Abu-Khdeir, a cheerful 16-year old boy with an engaging smile, poured gasoline in his mouth and burned him to death.

(As if this was not enough, Border Policemen caught his cousin during a protest demonstration, handcuffed him, threw him on the ground and started kicking his head and face. His wounds look terrible. The disfigured boy was arrested, the policemen were not.)

The atrocious way Muhammad was murdered was not mentioned at first. The fact was disclosed by an Arab pathologist who was present at the official autopsy. Most Israeli newspapers mentioned the fact in a few words on an inner page. Most TV newscasts did not mention the fact at all.

In Israel proper, Arab citizens rose up as they have not done in many years. Violent demonstrations throughout the country lasted for several days. At the same time, the Gaza Strip frontline exploded in a new orgy of rockets and aerial bombings in a new mini-war which already has a name: "Solid Cliff". (The army's propaganda section has invented another name in English.) The new Egyptian dictatorship is collaborating with the Israeli army in choking the Strip.

The names of the six suspects of the murder-by-fire – several of whom have already confessed to the appalling deed – are still being withheld. But unofficial reports say that they belong to the Orthodox community. Apparently this community, traditionally anti-Zionist and moderate, has now spawned neo-Nazi offspring, which surpass even their religious-Zionist competitors.

Yet terrible as the deed itself is, to my mind the public reaction is even worse. Because there isn't any.

True, a few sporadic voices have been heard. Many more ordinary people have voiced their disgust in private conversations. But the deafening moral outrage one could have expected did not materialize.

Everything was done to minimize the "incident", prevent its publication abroad and even inside Israel. Life went on as usual. A few government leaders and other politicians condemned the deed in routine phrases, for consumption abroad. The soccer world cup contest elicited far more interest. Even on the Left, the atrocity was treated as just another item among the many misdeeds of the occupation.

Where is the outcry, the moral uprising of the nation, the unanimous decision to stamp out the racism that makes such atrocities possible?

The new flare-up in and around the Gaza Strip has obliterated the atrocity altogether.

Sirens sound in Jerusalem and in towns north of Tel-Aviv. The missiles aimed at Israeli population centers have successfully (up to now) been intercepted by counter-missiles. But hundreds of thousands of men, women and children are running to the shelters. On the other side, hundreds of daily sorties of the Israeli Air Force turn life in the Gaza Strip into hell.

When the cannon roar, the muses fall silent.

Also the pity for a boy burnt to death.