

RELEASE IN PART B6

From: Sidney Blumenthal <[redacted]>
Sent: Saturday, November 17, 2012 10:47 PM
To: H
Subject: H: The war of "no choice" is a choice. Sid

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<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/17/opinion/israels-shortsighted-assassination.html>



November 16, 2012

Israel's Shortsighted Assassination

By GERSHON BASKIN

JERUSALEM

AHMED AL-JABARI — the strongman of Hamas, the head of its military wing, the man responsible for the abduction of the Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit — was assassinated on Wednesday by Israeli missiles.

Why? Israel's government has declared that the aim of the current strikes against Gaza is to rebuild deterrence so that no rockets will be fired on Israel. Israel's targeted killings of Hamas leaders in the past sent the Hamas leadership underground and prevented rocket attacks on Israel temporarily. According to Israeli leaders, deterrence will be achieved once again by targeting and killing military and political leaders in Gaza and hitting hard at Hamas's military infrastructure. But this policy has never been effective in the long term, even when the founder and spiritual leader of Hamas, Sheik Ahmed Yassin, was killed by Israel. Hamas didn't lay down its guns then, and it won't stop firing rockets at Israel now without a cease-fire agreement.

When we were negotiating with Hamas to release Mr. Shalit, members of the Israeli team believed that Mr. Jabari wouldn't make a deal because holding Mr. Shalit was a kind of "life insurance policy." As long as Mr. Jabari held Mr. Shalit, Israelis believed, the Hamas leader knew he was safe. The Israeli government had a freer hand to kill Mr. Jabari after Mr. Shalit was released in October 2011. His insurance policy was linked to their assessment of the value of keeping him alive. This week, that policy expired.

I believe that Israel made a grave and irresponsible strategic error by deciding to kill Mr. Jabari. No, Mr. Jabari was not a man of peace; he didn't believe in peace with Israel and refused to have any direct contact with Israeli leaders and even nonofficials like me. My indirect dealings with Mr. Jabari were handled through my Hamas counterpart, Ghazi Hamad, the deputy foreign minister of Hamas, who had received Mr. Jabari's authorization to deal directly with me. Since Mr. Jabari took over the military wing of Hamas, the only Israeli who spoke with him directly was Mr. Shalit, who was escorted out of Gaza by Mr. Jabari himself. (It is important to recall that Mr. Jabari not only abducted Mr. Shalit, but he also kept him alive and ensured that he was cared for during his captivity.)

Passing messages between the two sides, I was able to learn firsthand that Mr. Jabari wasn't just interested in a long-term cease-fire; he was also the person responsible for enforcing previous cease-fire understandings brokered by the Egyptian intelligence agency. Mr. Jabari enforced those cease-fires only after confirming that Israel was prepared to stop its attacks on Gaza. On the morning that he was killed, Mr. Jabari received a draft proposal for an extended cease-fire with Israel, including

mechanisms that would verify intentions and ensure compliance. This draft was agreed upon by me and Hamas's deputy foreign minister, Mr. Hamad, when we met last week in Egypt.

The goal was to move beyond the patterns of the past. For years, it has been the same story: Israeli intelligence discovers information about an impending terrorist attack from Gaza. The Israeli Army takes pre-emptive action with an airstrike against the suspected terror cells, which are often made up of fighters from groups like Islamic Jihad, the Popular Resistance Committees or Salafi groups not under Hamas's control but functioning within its territory. These cells launch rockets into Israeli towns near Gaza, and they often miss their targets. The Israeli Air Force responds swiftly. The typical result is between 10 and 25 casualties in Gaza, zero casualties in Israel and huge amounts of property damage on both sides.

Other key Hamas leaders and members of the Shura Council, its senior decision-making body, supported a new cease-fire effort because they, like Mr. Jabari, understood the futility of successive rocket attacks against Israel that left no real damage on Israel and dozens of casualties in Gaza. Mr. Jabari was not prepared to give up the strategy of "resistance," meaning fighting Israel, but he saw the need for a new strategy and was prepared to agree to a long-term cease-fire.

This war is being presented in Israel, once again, as a war of "no choice." The people of Israel are rallying around the flag as would be expected anywhere in the world. The United States government has voiced its support of the Israeli operation by stating, "Israel has the full right to defend itself and protect its citizens." It certainly does, but we must ask whether there is another way to achieve the same goal without the use of force.

Israel has used targeted killings, ground invasions, drones, F-16s, economic siege and political boycott. The only thing it has not tried and tested is reaching an agreement (through third parties) for a long-term mutual cease-fire.

No government can tolerate having its civilian population attacked by rockets from a neighboring territory. And the firing of thousands of rockets from Gaza into Israel must end. There was a chance for a mutually agreed cease-fire. The difference between the proposal I drafted in cooperation with my Hamas counterpart and past proposals was that it included both a mechanism for dealing with impending terror threats and a clear definition of breaches. This draft was to be translated and shared with both Mr. Jabari and Israeli security officials, who were aware of our mediation efforts.

In the draft, which I understand Mr. Jabari saw hours before he was killed, it was proposed that Israeli intelligence information transmitted through the Egyptians would be delivered to Mr. Jabari so that he could take action aimed at preventing an attack against Israel. Mr. Jabari and his forces would have had an opportunity to prove that they were serious when they told Egyptian intelligence officials that they were not interested in escalation. If Mr. Jabari had agreed to the draft, then we could have prevented this new round of violence; if he had refused, then Israel would have likely attacked in much the same way as it is now.

The proposal was at least worth testing. Moreover, it included the understanding that if Israel were to take out a real ticking bomb — people imminently preparing to launch a rocket — such a strike would not be considered a breach of the cease-fire and would not lead to escalation.

Instead, Mr. Jabari is dead — and with him died the possibility of a long-term cease-fire. Israel may have also compromised the ability of Egyptian intelligence officials to mediate a short-term cease-fire and placed Israel's peace treaty with Egypt at risk.

This was not inevitable, and cooler heads could have prevailed. Mr. Jabari's assassination removes one of the more practical actors on the Hamas side.

Who will replace him? I am not convinced that Israel's political and military leaders have adequately answered that question.

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