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The Muses and Death

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When the muses thunder, the guns stay silent. The adage, habitually inverted, is inaccurate.

The propaganda sirens are never as loud as when the cannons, the planes and helicopters buzz and spit their fire. The television chains, in Israel and elsewhere, with their journalists, commentators and special correspondents have, between the advertising, presided over the spilled blood which few amongst them appear to attach much importance.

A majority of the viewers and listeners, not least the leaders of the Western world, have reacted no differently. The latter, after having expressed their support to the Israeli operation, have waited until the onset of the humanitarian catastrophe to utter a discrete rebuke. It is simpler to lament past tragedies (the 'duty of memory'), than to open one's eyes, wide, to the tragedies before us.

In Israel, the population would prefer for Gaza to disappear; but it does want to keep the Golan Heights. Israel has left Gaza; it wants only to quietly colonize its 'Judea and Samaria' (the West Bank), without its ambitions being inhibited by a cruel enemy. In Israel, the country prays for the extermination of Hamas and its partisans, and the hardliners add the young who are presumed destined to become Hamas supporters. Meanwhile, Jewish Israelis aspire to develop and reinforce the Jewish character of the Israeli state, rendering invisible a quarter of the citizens, not defined as Jewish.

'No normal state can accept being the target of rocket fire', claimed the Israeli Prime Minister,

Benjamin Netanyahu, at the beginning of the war. He's quite right. But it should have also been necessary to remind Netanyahu that no normal state could accept that, in its capital, the capital of Jewish people, one-third of its inhabitants should be deprived of sovereignty and lack democratic rights. Equally there are few states that obstinately refuse, for years, to establish definitive borders, in the hope, ill-concealed, of expanding them further. Does there exist, perhaps, any link between all these things that characterize Israel's 'abnormality'?

It is well known that, in the wars of modern history, it is always the enemy that initiated hostilities. That is why the Jewish state, peace-loving, asserts that it is only responding to attacks of which it is a victim. Is that so? Is that how history is written? Is there not, in this latest tragedy, a short history and a long history that differ, and rather disturbingly?

In the 1950s, when I was a child, my father took me to the cinema to watch Westerns. He loved the open spaces. As for me, I loved the cowboy pioneers, and I hated the Indians. It was pretty much always the same script: a convoy of settlers travelling slowly and calmly, and, suddenly, it is attacked by riders, half-naked, with painted and wicked faces. One hears the cries, the arrows come from everywhere, women and children are hit. Happily, the courageous heroes succeed in repelling the attackers. The wagons are able to tranquilly continue on their journey to conquer new lands and to colonize the desert. By the end, in the movies, we come out victors – me and my white heroes.

But by the end of the 1960s, Hollywood has undergone a devious transformation which has destroyed the pious images of my childhood. I have then watched other scenarios – horrible settlers steal the land and massacre the indigenes, the survivors being crammed into reservations.

Later, while studying history, my political and moral options are narrowed. Since then, I find myself on the side of the victims, of those who, even if they are unsavory, have cause to demand their land and the right to live freely. If I have become 'leftist', one of the reasons is that, even if today I belong to the camp of the strong, I remain a descendant of yesterday's victims.

Here, the story begins about 130 years ago, when anti-Semitic Eastern Europe spews out its Jews. Contrary to the bulk of the refugees and emigrants who head for the new Promised Land in North America, a small Zionist minority decided that they preferred their own state in historic Canaan. Thus has begun its colonization in the Middle East, in invoking the Bible, after the fashion of the Puritan settlers, but without religious motivation.

It is also necessary to remember that, from the beginning, the settlers generally did not intend to integrate with the local population, but rather to found their own Jewish state. For 130 years, they have devoted themselves to supplanting the natives, and they have succeeded in conquering the whole of the country. Each time, since 1929, when a settler group has been violently attacked, it has always triumphed. It has completed its journey, not at San Francisco, but at Jericho, and in place of creating Las Vegas, it has founded its colonies in the Jordan Valley.

Israel's 'cardinal fault' rests in the fact that, contrary to those who moved to North America, it has not exterminated the majority of the indigenes. As an eminent Israeli historian has underlined, it has erred in not expelling them all and far from its new state. In its blindness, it has not thought ahead, letting some of them remain living within the expanding Jewish state,

with others amassed on its borders.

When I see, on television, the images originating from Gaza, I can't prevent myself thinking that at least 70% of the people filmed are descendants of refugees who once lived in the places where I live and work – to the north of Tel-Aviv (Shah Muwannis), at Jaffa or at Majdal (now called Ashkelon). At the same time, I remember the American Indian reservations of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century which, out of despair, violently rebelled, before surrendering ultimately to White power.

A story from the here and now deserves a long term perspective. “Suddenly, and without warning, Hamas starts bombarding us with rockets”, exclaims to the world the Israeli Foreign Minister, Avigdor Lieberman. But there also, the story began in a fashion markedly different. Three young people from the settlements, un-armed, were kidnapped and cruelly murdered in the West Bank, not far from the residence of this same Minister of Foreign Affairs, who lives outside the territory of his own state, in the frontiers of the land that God has promised him. Compared to past situations, Hamas denied being responsible for the crime or having authorized it. (Israel has only found the ‘proof’ that Hamas could have sponsored the abduction until after the onset of the war.)

However, the Israeli government, caring little for the lack of identification of those responsible, while seeking the killers it simultaneously engages in a generalized test of force against Hamas in the West Bank. In contempt of the acknowledged rules of the game, it has not hesitated to arbitrarily arrest, yet again, an important number of prisoners, members of Hamas in the West Bank, who had been freed at the time of the accord involving the exchange for Gilad Shalit. At the same time, and without arousing the least attention, five young Palestinians, unarmed, were killed during protest demonstrations in the West Bank, and a Palestinian adolescent was burned alive by a gang of Jewish Israelis.

Did the Israeli leaders imagine that Hamas would not be forced to react after such a declaration of war against it? Were they persuaded that, in view of the balance of forces, Israel as occupying power would have free rein? One could also infer that after the failure of the fictive peace process negotiations, and the rapprochement between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority, the Israeli government has deliberately decided to break up the progress of an intra-Palestinian compromise.

In other words, was the intended humiliation of Hamas at the price of a new war, encouraged by the arrival to power of the military dictatorship in Egypt that is hostile to Hamas. Saudi Arabia has equally secretly expressed its support. Moreover, the Israeli government has reasonably assumed that it is able to eternally subject to silence the West Bank, neighbor of the Jewish state.

Benjamin Netanyahu who, in his great generosity, would like to see every Jew acquire a villa in ‘Judea and Samaria’, exclaims, shocked, “They have built tunnels against us, instead of building schools, hospitals and hotels” – thus the grounds for a new war against them. As if a population enclosed in a densely populated area, submitted to a long blockade and completely cut off from the world, and who are prevented from building an airport and port, would bother to invest in real estate and not in underground tunnels! I am convinced that if the Gazans acquired some fighter planes, helicopters and tanks from the US, they would have no need to transform themselves into moles to, one fine day, emerge and break by force the siege that is imposed on them.

In truth, I ignore what Benjamin Netanyahu and his Ministers think – I leave to future historians the task of interpreting it. On the other hand, I know that Israel has never left Gaza, and that, as a consequence, Gaza will not leave Israel any time soon. In the meantime, the outcome, peculiar and dreadful, of this cruel war is that Hamas has fired indiscriminately on civilians yet has killed mostly combatants, whereas Israel, which claims to want to strike only combatants has overwhelmingly killed civilians. At some point, in spite of the abundance of sophisticated high-tech American armaments, the confrontation has turned into merciless mass murder.

The muses who will cry tomorrow for the victims of both sides will certainly evoke this imbalance. For lack of an equitable solution to the conflict, the images of thousands of women, of children, and of the elderly, descendants of the refugees of 1948, wandering among the houses in ruins in the summer of 2014, will continue to feed hatred, indefinitely.

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