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BULLETIN

The Barzini Moment

Don Corleone: Tattaglia is a pimp. He never could have outfought Santino. But I didn't know until this day that it was Barzini all along.

The Godfather, Part 1*¹

Last week, Israel had its Barzini moment. The Israeli public, with the very active assistance of the Israeli media -- and, I am pretty certain, thanks to an intense 'educational' effort on the part of the government, the army and the 'intelligence community' -- was made aware of the fact that the war in which it was/is engaged is not merely with Hamas. The terrorist organisation running Gaza is, of course, the primary entity engaged in firing mortars at the areas immediately adjacent to the Gaza Strip, small rockets to the nearby towns and cities and much larger ones at the Tel Aviv conurbation and other, more distant, targets. Hamas is, furthermore, the organisation that has painstakingly constructed the network of tunnels that unexpectedly became the focus of the recent military incursion, as well as the much larger network within Gaza city, which serve as shelter, barracks, communications and much else for Hamas' commanders and rank and file. As such, it remains the immediate enemy.

But all that merely begs the larger questions. How did Hamas have the know-how, technical capabilities and, above all, the financing to construct what Israelis have learned to call "subterranean Gaza", to acquire such an arsenal of rockets and to build so much of its own manufacturing capabilities for mortar shells, rockets and much else? How did Hamas have the staying power to hold out against a military operation that in every quantitative and qualitative aspect was by far the most powerful, intense and destructive that the Israeli army had ever launched against the Gaza Strip?

The Israeli leadership, both political and military, seems to have been well aware of the answers -- as it was aware of the scale of the tunnel network and of the threat it posed. But being cognitively aware proved to be insufficient, because the seriousness of the threats was not internalized and therefore not acted upon, until they began to be realized.

¹ For those not familiar with the book and/ or film, Don Corleone is reflecting on the meeting he initiated, attended by the heads of the crime families in NYC and outside, where he ended the war with the Tattaglias, who had tried to assassinate him. It marks a key turning-point in the plot.

So, too, with the Tattaglia/ Barzini structure of the war. The Israeli leadership was well aware that Hamas had found a new sugar-daddy in the last 2-3 years, after its break with its former primary benefactor, Iran. This new player and provider is Qatar. This was no secret -- Khaled Meshal, the head of Hamas' political wing, moved to Qatar from Damascus after falling out with both the Assad regime and his and its patron, Iran, against the background of the Syrian civil war and the regime's mass killings of Sunni militias and their supporters.

However, during the year in which the Moslem Brotherhood ruled Egypt, things were looking very bright for Hamas -- the Palestinian wing of the Brotherhood. By the same token, the military coup last July was a disaster for Hamas, because the new government of General al-Sisi has pursued a campaign designed to destroy the Brotherhood -- and extended this campaign to Hamas. The Egyptian programme of destroying many of the tunnels between Egyptian Sinai and the Gaza Strip and blocking the others effectively throttled Hamas, forcing the radical Islamist organization into a rapprochement with its secular-nationalist Palestinian rival and enemy, Fatah, and the formation of a 'government of reconciliation' under Fatah leader Mahmoud Abbas (a.k.a. Abu Mazen).

Indeed, it is probable that the impact of the Egyptian moves against Hamas was so great that it generated a 'backs to the wall' attitude among Hamas leadership which pushed them to plan an escalation that resulted in the latest round of fighting. Hamas knows it is playing for very high stakes -- its continued control of Gaza and its very existence as a cohesive political/ military entity -- and it was/is therefore willing to risk much and endure considerable suffering (and/ or inflict suffering on others) in an effort to remove the Egyptian-Israeli stranglehold on Gaza.

This explains the motive for the fight -- and even explains the warped logic behind the Hamas' leaders' declarations of victory when they emerged from their bunkers after the ceasefire went into effect. From their point of view, the more dead Palestinians and the more destroyed houses, the better their chances of extricating themselves from the extremely tight spot they were in.

But while this explains the why, it doesn't explain the how. As noted, Hamas' capabilities are the result primarily of Qatari largesse and secondarily that of Iran. The know-how in rocketry and tunneling came from Hezbollah --probably originally from North Korea, by far the world's leading tunnel builder. However, the sheer scale of both the tunnel-building project and of the arsenal of rockets has been made possible by Qatari funding.

The wider war

Hamas is much closer to Qatar than to Iran, religiously and racially. More specifically, Hamas has become a protégé of the Emir Tamim al Thani, who runs the very small, but extraordinarily rich country -- having succeeded his father in July 2013, when the latter abdicated in his favour. The energetic young emir is also a very religious Sunni and has emerged as the main supporter of the rebels in Syria, of Hamas and of the Moslem Brotherhood in Egypt. Not only does he, by dint of his ownership of Al Jazeera, set much of the media agenda in the Arab world, he also has a channel dedicated to besmirching and ultimately bringing down the al-Sisi government in Egypt. More generally, Qatar is engaged in using its wealth to buy power and influence throughout the Arab, Moslem and wider world. Not surprisingly, it has made a lot of enemies along the way, notably Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

In practice, this means that the Middle East is split not only along Sunni/ Shi'a lines, with a struggle underway between Iran and its allies and the Sunni countries -- in which the Syrian civil war served as the focus and front line, at least until the eruption of ISIS -- but also along an intra-Sunni divide. On the one side of this are the moderate regimes of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, UAE and other Gulf states, Jordan and Egypt; on the other side are Qatar, Turkey under the increasingly radical leadership of Erdogan, the Moslem Brotherhood/ Hamas, and now perhaps ISIS/ IS as well.

All of this is the outcome of the series of upheavals that have occurred over the last few years and that are ongoing. **Their combined result has been to render obsolete the accepted patterns of alliances and, indeed, the traditional way of thinking about Middle-Eastern geo-politics.** In 2006, during and after the Second Lebanon War, I wrote about the tacit Israel-Saudi alliance that had emerged -- with the Saudis almost vocally cheering on the IDF from the sidelines, in the hope that it would destroy Hezbollah -- and then expressing disappointment that that outcome had not been achieved. At that time, the Mubarak regime was still firmly in control of Egypt and Israel-Egypt relations were sound.

Today, it is obvious that Israel and Saudi are 'on the same side', simply by dint of having the same enemies. Meanwhile, Israel-Egypt relations, at the governmental level, are not merely sound -- they are close, based on numerous shared interests. But the glue binding the Israel-Egypt-Saudi axis, discussed in recent issues of TLR but far more glaring after the events of the last month, is the fact that these countries are all American allies which have lost the confidence of, and their own confidence in, the Obama Administration. They cannot understand why they have been spurned, shunned or ignored, whilst the US courts Turkey, Qatar and, indirectly, Hamas. With common enemies and a common ex-superpower patron, the Israeli-Egypt-Saudi axis, and its affiliate states of Jordan and the PA, is now a prominent feature of regional politics -- and nowhere more so than vis--a-vis the Gaza Strip, where Israel and Egypt control all access and will make every effort to prevent Turkey from gaining influence, whilst expunging as much of Qatari influence as they can.

Until June, Israel was more than happy to remain in the deep background of this political structure, but Hamas forced it onto center-stage. Consequently, the most likely outcome of the war-cum-negotiations (now underway) is that Egypt will emerge as the biggest winner, its prestige much enhanced and its central position in the Arab world reconfirmed. By definition, therefore, Qatar will be a loser -- a result that it will surely seek to reverse. It is arguable that the US has been the biggest loser of all, but that requires a separate analysis.

This brings us back to Israel's 'Barzini moment'. The realisation that "it was Barzini all along" -- and therefore that the pursuit of a war of vengeance against Hamas would be a strategic blunder and a sentimental indulgence -- may well explain, in whole or in part, the determination of the Netanyahu-Ya'alon government not to be drawn by Hamas into a full-scale invasion of Gaza. Hamas desperately wanted that outcome, the right-wing ministers in the security cabinet and the full government, as well as much of the coalition all clamoured for it, public opinion largely supported it and the army -- up to, but not including, the high command, was eager to implement it. However, seeing the wider regional context highlights the pointlessness of that strategy.

If it is the case that Israel and Egypt are and will remain fully aligned with respect to the Gaza Strip, Hamas and Qatar, and that the Saudis, Kuwaitis and Emiratis are also 'on board', then the 'Protective Edge' operation is not -- as is widely believed -- simply another round in the Israel-Palestinian conflict, but an event with much greater significance. It is potentially far-reaching, in both the literal and metaphorical senses.

On the positive side, it opens the way to the elimination of Hamas control over Gaza -- not that they will go quietly or peacefully, but Egypt and Israel, with regional and international support, could achieve that result over time. It then opens the way to a new Israeli-Palestinian accommodation which, in turn, could lead to a regional accommodation of the sort originally envisioned in the Saudi proposals of 2002. This sounds like wishful thinking, if not outright Utopia, but merely mentioning 2002 forces one to realize how much has changed over the last twelve years.

On the other side, the realisation that Qatar is a major player and is the patron of many of the radical entities in the region has major implications. Qatar may be a tiny country with a small army, but it is already a leading cyber-power -- probably more powerful than any Western European country -- and cyber warfare is not the future, it is the present. Thus the practical outcome of the 'Barzini moment' is the understanding that Israel is at war with Qatar -- perhaps assisted by Egypt and Saudi but, if necessary, on its own. No-one actually knows what a full-scale cyber-war will look like, but if we find out, it won't be in Ukraine, nor in Libya. It might be in the East China Sea -- but it might also be in the Persian Gulf, in a country that has the largest natural gas reserves in the world. That is a scenario that the financial markets -- and, for that matter, the global real economy -- may not be entirely comfortable with.

Of course, the Tattaglia/ Barzini model already exists in the region -- in the Hezbollah/ Iran relationship. But both Hezbollah and Iran, radical and dangerous as they may be, are more serious, more rational and ultimately more responsible entities than Hamas and Qatar. Nevertheless, having to face both sets simultaneously is an enormous challenge -- and helps explain how such formerly implacable enemies as Saudi Arabia and Israel can and must make common cause.

"How did things ever get so far?", asked Don Vito Corleone at the "peace conference" he called for the heads of the crime families. His rhetorical answer was "I don't know" -- but in the context of the Middle East today, the answer is pretty clear. The sheriff stopped functioning. Why and how that has come about, and what the implications are, is the next subject on the agenda.

Enquiries and subscriptions:
POB 23152, Jerusalem 91231, ISRAEL
landaup@netvision.net.il
Tel: 972-2-586-4893; Cell: 972-54-450-8834