

COMMENT & FEATURES

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Rockets and drones

Most eyes in Israel were looking to the North on Sunday night, where the recent attempted attacks using explosive-laden drones had grabbed headlines and imaginations. However, Gaza-based Palestinian groups sent their own chilling reminder that the threats from the South are no less serious.

Earlier in the day, Palestinian Islamic Jihad and the Hamas terror organization, which rules the Gaza Strip, threatened to respond to Israel's defensive actions in the North, which included Israel's destruction of an Iranian drone storage site near Damascus and a similar reported Israeli strike against a Hezbollah target in a Beirut suburb.

Three projectiles were fired from Gaza on Sunday. One was knocked out by the Iron Dome system above an open-air, end-of-summer concert in Sderot. Thousands of people, including families with young children making the most of the last week of the school vacation, were enjoying the concert when the rocket was launched.

The seriousness of this attack should not be underestimated. Not only were the crowd of people exposed to the direct danger of the rocket itself, but there was a huge risk of a deadly stampede. While the concert organizers immediately ordered that the gates be opened to allow the audience to leave, many people realizing there was no place to take shelter, followed standard safety procedures in these circumstances and simply lay down with their hands on their heads to protect them from shrapnel.

The situation where half of a panicking crowd was running and scrambling to leave the site and the other half – including very young children – was lying on the ground, is a frightening one.

Fortunately, nobody was seriously hurt in the rocket attack, although the long-term effects of shock and emotional trauma should not be belittled.

Had the rocket caused loss of life, either directly or as a consequence of a stampede, the government would have been left with no option but to risk further escalating the situation with a swift and harsh response – incurring likely international condemnation.

The security cabinet convened Monday to discuss what steps should be taken. The dilemma is very real. For a long time, residents of the South and elsewhere have questioned whether avoiding a serious military response encourages more attacks. Could the escalation of the so-called "Great March of Return" on the Gaza-Israeli border – and the hundreds of attacks using incendiary devices – have been averted by knocking out the terrorists months ago, who launched the flying firebombs and tried to breach the border fence? Or would this type of action have dragged Israel into another war with Hamas, with the potential loss of lives on both sides of the border and no significantly different results from what followed Operation Protective Edge in 2014?

And for those concerned about the drones in the North this week, it should be noted that attempted attacks using drones have also been carried out from Gaza, along with the balloon- and kite-incendiary attacks.

The IDF said that each drone was capable of carrying several kilograms of explosives. But then again, each rocket fired from Gaza carries with it several kilograms of explosives – and those are fired daily!

Israel has been repeatedly told that Hamas is not interested in war and yet the attacks continue – even in a week when Israel allowed another massive amount of Qatari funding into the Gaza Strip. Hamas has claimed that the rockets were not fired by its members, but either it is in control of the Gaza Strip or it isn't: Hamas can't have it both ways.

Meanwhile Hezbollah, situated over Israel's northern border, is undoubtedly watching to see what consequences – if any – Hamas will incur.

There is a tactical question of how to respond to the latest drone attacks in the North and rocket attacks in the South, not forgetting the horrific IED attack in which 17-year-old Rina Shnerb lost her life on Friday during a family trip to a spring in the Benjamin region. But another question hovers in the air: Does restraint show moral strength or does it undermine Israel by ruining deterrence? When all players in the region are watching one another, what happens on one front immediately radiates to the others.

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The call to brand Hezbollah

By RAMAN GHAVAMI

The news that Brazil's President Jair Bolsonaro is actively considering labeling Hezbollah a terrorist organization should be welcomed across the civilized world. Momentum is finally gathering behind this movement, as governments belatedly recognize the pernicious and malign threat this organization poses. Previously, they have avoided such measures due to the so-called, entirely illusory distinction between Hezbollah's military and political wings. As Iran's proxy-in-chief, we must use all tools at our disposal to cut off their funding and inhibit their ability to operate.

Iran has long sought to destabilize its neighbors and perceived enemies through unconventional means. Lacking the resources of "the Great Satan" in the United States, it has sought to project its power by funding, supplying and training ruthless and violent groups who can disrupt and destabilize without requiring the force of a highly developed, well trained military. Hezbollah has become the standard bearer for this approach, which has also been extended to Hamas in Gaza and the Houthis in Yemen.

For a variety of political reasons, including a concerted lobbying effort by Islamists and apologists for extremism, Western governments have been reluctant to brand Hezbollah, in its entirety, as terrorists. The United Kingdom has long held off on such a move, with then home secretary Sajid Javid finally announcing full proscription earlier this

year. But the terrorist group's destabilizing and destructive effect has been felt for years, with its virulent and violent hatred of Jews and its spreading of potent antisemitic tropes a well-known aspect of the group's work since inception.

In its infancy, Hezbollah targeted Europeans in the Middle East, attacking French military bases and diplomats across the region. It has been a vehicle through which Iran can attack its enemies across the globe without the culpability of direct involvement. The bomb factory discovered in London in 2015 is a testament to how this organization seeks to terrorize the populations and societies of countries well beyond the borders of the Middle East, under the direction of its Tehran paymasters.

To brand the military wing alone as terrorists, while overlooking the political wing, is to study only the poison and ignore the source. To suggest in any way that Hezbollah's terrorist activities are entirely disassociated from the violent ideology that supports it, is entirely false and intellectually bankrupt. This is essentially what those nations who have failed to designate both terror organizations have done, and prevents our ability to effectively combat their violent ideology.

Furthermore, it threatens to lend Iran's war by proxy a greater degree of acceptability, by failing to call out the organization for what it is. As long as Hezbollah's political organization is seen as a legitimate actor, then Tehran will continue to encourage its destructive methods, just as the Islamic Repub-



LEBANON'S HEZBOLLAH leader Hassan Nasrallah addresses his supporters via a screen during a rally marking Jerusalem Day in Maroun Al-Ras village, near the border with Israel. (Reuters)

lic has done with the Houthis in Yemen, who have been emboldened by the air of misplaced legitimacy bestowed on them by some international actors.

This approach is having a significant impact on some of the world's most unstable hot spots. The organization's presence in Venezuela, for example, which helps fund much of its activities, is exacerbating the already desperate situation the people of that country find themselves in under the brutal rule of Nicholas Maduro.

In order to combat a malign force, you first have to recognize it for what it is. The European Union and others who have yet to proscribe Hezbollah as terrorists are failing to face up to reality and ignoring arguably Iran's greatest

threat to global stability.

A coherent global strategy to combat the influence and activities of extremists and terrorists needs to recognize those who are first and foremost. As G7 leaders gather in Biarritz this week, they should be reminded to follow Brazil's lead and brand Hezbollah the terrorists that they so evidently are.

Raman Ghavami is an Iranian Middle East analyst based in Edinburgh and the Middle East. He has worked as a consultant and adviser for various organizations across the Middle East and Europe such as EU, MDM and KKC. He is currently working for a consultancy firm based in the UK focusing on insurgency and counter-insurgency. Ghavami holds an MA in International Relations.

The Fate of Ethiopia's Jews

By SHIMSHON HAKOHEN NADEL

In November 2015, Israel's Knesset decided to bring the remainder of Ethiopia's Jewish community on aliyah. But more than three years later, the State of Israel has not yet fulfilled its commitment. Activists in both Israel and Ethiopia are calling on the state to bring the remaining community – some 7,500 souls – home.

Some question their status as Jews: Are they still left in Ethiopia today really Jewish? Or are they just opportunists looking for a better life in the State of Israel?

In October, I had the opportunity to visit Addis Ababa, Ethiopia's capital, and see for myself.

As my plane was touching down, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had just announced that 1,000 Ethiopians could make aliyah to Israel. For many, this is too little, too late.

Unfortunately, there is much misinformation, distortion, and "fake-news" about the Ethiopian community tossed about in the media. What's missing from the conversation is some important history and background.

According to one tradition, King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba had a child, Menelik I, King of Ethiopia. According to the legend, Menelik travels to Jerusalem to visit Shlomo, and the king sends him back with Jewish servants, who subsequently become the Jewish community in Ethiopia. While I Kings (10:1-13) and II Chronicles (9:1-12) describe the queen's visit to Jerusalem and her interaction with Shlomo, there is no evidence that they had a child together.

The more popular tradition is that the Jews of Ethiopia are descendants of the tribe of Dan, one of the ten lost tribes conquered by Sancherev and the Assyrian Empire in the 8th Century BCE.

THE EARLIEST record of a Jewish community in Ethiopia is the 9th century work, *The Book of Eldad ha-Dani*. Eldad ha-Dani (literally "from Dan") documents his travels throughout North Africa and the Mediterranean, visiting communities, weaving tales and recording Jewish law. He claims to come from a powerful, independent Jewish kingdom in East Africa, comprised of the descendants of the lost tribes of Dan, Naftali, Gad and Asher. He also mentions other lost tribes, their whereabouts and histories, and makes reference to "sons of Moshe" also residing in Africa.

According to Eldad, the Jews of Ethiopia are the descendants of the tribe of Dan.

Following Eldad's visit to the Jewish community of Kairouan, Tunisia, the community sends a letter to the leading authority, Tzemach Gaon of Sura, questioning Eldad's account. Rabbi Tzemach Gaon replies that indeed his account is reliable, as are the laws he teaches.

But in his commentary to Shemos 2:22, the Ibn Ezra questions the veracity of Eldad's accounts, as does Maharam mi-Rotenberg (*Teshuvot Maharam* 193).

Yet Eldad is cited by many of the major medieval authorities such as Rashi, Raavad, Rabbeinu Asher, Rashba, Semag and Maimonides' son Rav Avraham among others, as a reputable source. Later authorities would likewise rely on his testimony and quote the laws he taught. Some even call him rabbi!

Twelfth century travelers Benjamin of Tudela and Prester John both record the presence of a Jewish community in Ethiopia.

And in letters to his family written while in Jerusalem, Rabbi Ovadia of Bartenura affirms this tradition. In a letter to his father dated 6 Elul 5248 (August 15, 1488) he reports that while in Egypt, he saw dark-skinned Jews from Ethiopia who lacked knowledge of the Oral Law and its traditions. In a letter to his brother written 27 Elul 5249 (August 24, 1489), he reports that Yemenite Jews in Jerusalem confirmed that there are

Jews in Ethiopia beyond the River Sambatyon, alluding to the rabbinic tradition of the place to where the Lost tribes were exiled (Avraham Yaari, *Igrot Eretz Yisrael*, pp. 132-133, 140-141).

WRITING IN the 16th century, the Radbaz, Rav David ibn Zimra, rules that the Jews of Ethiopia are indeed descendants of the tribe of Dan, affirming the account of Eldad ha-Dani (*Teshuvot ha-Radbaz* 4:219; 7:9). In another responsa he is emphatic that they are unquestionably of Jewish lineage according to Jewish law (ibid, 7:5). A student of his, Rav Ya'akov Castro issued a similar ruling (*Erech Lechem*, Yoreh De'ah 158).

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Christian missionary groups began aggressively targeting the Jewish community for conversion. Missionaries like Samuel Gobat, John Martin Flad and Henry Aaron Stern describe the Jewish community and document their missionary activities during this period in books they would later publish.

At the same time, there was renewed interest in the plight of the Jews of Ethiopia by Jews in Europe.

In 1864, Rabbi Azriel Hildesheimer issued a call to action to counter missionary activity. In 1908, a letter signed by 43 prominent rabbis of Israel and the Diaspora encouraged the Beta Israel to be steadfast in their faith. Visits to Ethiopia by Jewish scholars and educators followed.

In 1912, Chief Rabbi of Israel Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Kook wrote a letter expressing his sincere support for sending teachers to Ethiopia to educate the community (*Igros ha-Ra'ayah* 2:432).

And, following the founding of the State of Israel, the status of Ethiopian Jews would once again be discussed and debated to determine whether they would be eligible to immigrate under Israel's Law of Return.

In 1951, Chief Rabbi Yitzchak Herzog was asked by the Jewish Agency to rule on the status of the Ethiopian Jews. In a teshuvah written in 1954, Rav Herzog debates their pedigree, and due to a number of concerns concludes they would require conversion.

Almost twenty years later, in February, 1973, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef ruled that the Beta Israel – the group which clung strongly to their faith for thousands of years – should be accorded full legal status as Jews. Rabbi Yosef's ruling helped set in motion a chain of events that would change the government's attitude and policy towards the Ethiopian Jews, and eventually lead to the dramatic airlifts of Operation Moses and Solomon.

IN 1975, the Beta Israel community was officially recognized as Jewish by the State of Israel under the Law of Return, and in 1977 they began to arrive as *olim* (new immigrants).

In a subsequent responsa written in 1985, Rabbi Yosef addresses Rabbi Herzog's ruling and writes, "I did not want to differ from the authority of Rabbi Herzog... But in point of law, I do not agree, and it is my opinion that one should rely upon the aforementioned rulings, that the Falashas are Jews in every respect and are in no need of conversion, even out of stringency" (*Yabia Omer*, Even ha-Ezer 8:11).

In a letter dated 26 Sivan 5644 (June 26, 1984), Rabbi Moshe Feinstein rules that the Beta Israel need to undergo a conversion to remove any doubts, "and we shall consider them like all Jews, and assist them and support their needs, both physically and spiritually." Feinstein concludes and writes that: "I suffered great anguish because I have heard there are those in Israel who are not drawing them close in spiritual matters and are causing, Heaven forbid, that they might be lost from Judaism. And it seems to me that these people are behaving so only because the color of their skin is black.

"It is obvious that one must draw them close, not only because they are no worse than the rest of the Jews – and because there is no distinction in practical application of the law because they are black – but also because perhaps they are considered converts, and are therefore included in the mitzvah, 'You shall love the convert.' And I conclude with the hope that the situation will improve, and in the merit in observing all the mitzvot, we should all soon merit to the ingathering of the exiles by our righteous Moshiach." (See also *Igrot Moshe*, Yoreh De'ah 4:41).

Similarly, rabbis Eliezer Waldenberg, Menachem Shakh, Shalom Yosef Elyashiv, Shlomo Zalman Auerbach and Yitzchak Weiss all required that they undergo conversion (*Tzitz Eliezer* 17:48).

The official position of the Chief Rabbinate is that the Beta Israel have a strong presumptive status as Jews, but require conversion to rule out any doubts.

The community that remains today in Ethiopia numbers approximately 8,000 souls: 2,000 in the nation's capital Addis Ababa, and 6,000 in Gondar in the North. They sit and wait while the government of Israel reaches a final decision regarding their immigration. Dubbed the derogatory "Falash Mura," many of them are descendants of those forced or pressured to convert to Christianity a century ago. They currently live as sincere, practicing Jews and will all undergo a full conversion upon making aliyah.

ARRIVING EARLY on a Sunday morning, I joined the community for morning prayers at the Tikvat Zion Synagogue. On an ordinary Sunday morning, almost 200 people – men, women and children – filed into the synagogue and prayed in Hebrew and Amharic for almost two hours – something that would put most synagogues in Israel to shame!

It was inspiring to see their passion and commitment.

In the afternoon, there was a meeting of the local chapter of Bnei Akiva, the National-Religious youth movement. Young people gathered to study Hebrew in preparation for a life in Israel. I had the opportunity to teach, sing and interact with the youth. But as much as I could teach them – they taught me so much more.

Visiting with the community in Addis Ababa, I was surprised to learn that they all have family already in Israel – many of them immediate family – that they long to be reunited with. Today, mothers are forced to decide whether to stay with children in Ethiopia, or be reunited with children already in Israel.

I was also surprised to learn that the community members are not originally from either Addis Ababa or Gondar. They are from rural farming villages scattered throughout Ethiopia and Eritrea, having moved to these major cities in recent decades in hopes of making aliyah. They have made tremendous sacrifices, leaving their homes and everything else behind.

Today, they suffer silently as refugees as they wait in congested cities, living in poverty with a lack of opportunities. They are mistreated by their gentile neighbors, and seen as outsiders by their society. Their quality of life is very poor. They are hungry and don't have access to proper healthcare. On the wall of the synagogue hangs an embroidery with names – in English and Amharic – of members of the community who died while waiting to make aliyah.

What I found in Addis Ababa was a community deeply committed to the Torah of Israel, the People of Israel, and the Land of Israel. They are waiting to reunite with their family and their ancestral homeland.

Anyone who questions their sincerity just needs to visit Ethiopia and see for themselves. My opinion – and my life – was forever changed.

The author lives and teaches in Jerusalem, where he serves as rabbi of Har Nof's Kehilat Zichron Yosef.