

Analysis / The attack in Hebron was not a 'massacre'

The Foreign Ministry's successful "spin" on the Islamic Jihad attack in Hebron on Friday night in which 12 Israelis were killed, matched by statements made by official spokespeople such as Minister Danny Naveh and director of the prime minister's office Dov Weissglas, lasted only a few hours.

What happened in Hebron on Friday night was not a "massacre," as claimed by the spokespeople, nor was it an attack on "peaceful Jewish worshippers" returning from prayers at the Tomb of the Patriarchs.

The attack actually began several minutes after all of the worshippers had already returned safely to Kiryat Arba. The twelve Israeli casualties in Hebron were not murdered in the same fashion that residents of Kibbutz Metzger were, nor did they die in the same manner in which young settlers were murdered in Hermez.

Those killed Friday were killed in combat. All of the victims were armed fighters, who were more or less trained. They fell victim to a well-planned ambush that included both machine-gun fire and grenades, which trapped them in a compromising situation they found hard to overcome. There is a vast difference between what happened on Friday night and the horrific massacres carried out by Palestinian terrorists in civilian settlements.

Various individuals interviewed Saturday on television and radio programs, most of the from the right, blamed former defense minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer for Friday's tragedy. If he would not have insisted on withdrawing from parts of Hebron at the end of October, within the framework of the "Judea First" plan, they claimed, none of this would have happened.

But the ambush actually took place in the "Israeli" section of Hebron, dozens of meters from the Kiryat Arba security fence, in an area occupied by the IDF before the withdrawal, and where soldiers have continued to operate since the withdrawal. Even the Haret a-Sheikh and Abu Sneineh neighborhoods - troop withdrawals in these areas led to the greatest amount of disagreements because they are perched above the city's Jewish enclave - have been patrolled regularly by the IDF since the withdrawal.

If there is any logic to the claims made Saturday, it is that Islamic Jihad activists, whose headquarters are located in the section of Hebron under Palestinian Authority control, could operate more freely since

the IDF retreat.

Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz held consultations Saturday night with senior IDF officers and Shin Bet officials. The IDF cancelled the "Judea First" understandings, and restored its control over the entire city of Hebron.

According to a senior officer, the IDF will now engage in a wide-scale search in the city for terrorists and Islamic Jihad members, whose two leaders have in the past eluded Israeli forces. The Nahal brigade operating in Hebron will join the ongoing effort in Nablus and Jenin.

With regard to Ramallah, IDF Chief of Staff Moshe Ya'alon expressed doubts over the readiness of the United States to let Israel deviate from the rules of the game established ahead of action in Iraq, which determine that Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat must not be touched.

But the most important factor right now in the West Bank is a Jewish one, not a Palestinian one. Settlers in Hebron made clear on Saturday that they intend to avenge what happened on Friday night, in the immediate future.

Before the Sabbath ended, settlers threatened the Palestinians, and afterwards they shifted to acts of violence. Shin Bet Chief Avi Dichter spoke recently of fears of a Jewish terror cell. Now it is clear that the cell will operate soon. The weekend events in Hebron plunged matters in the territories into another whirlpool, which threatens to drag the sides down to a point lower and more painful than the one they were at before.

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