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In Israel, a Divisive Struggle Over Targeted Killing; [FINAL Edition]

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Abstract (Summary)

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Immediately, Dichter and Yaalon began to argue. Dichter favored the heavy bomb; Yaalon wanted to abort the operation. They both had worked for decades in counter-terrorism, had served in the same secret commando unit and had, as Dichter put it, "traveled together without passports deep into Arab lands."

Dichter's sense of urgency shaped his thinking on Sept. 6, 2003. But on a deeper level, his father's life played a role. Like Yaalon's mother, Dichter's father was a Holocaust survivor and the only member of his family who was not killed by the Nazis. Dichter's father never talked about it either, and yet Dichter absorbed a lesson from him.

Full Text (4874 words)

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Israel's top military commander sat on the edge of his bed, talking on the phone, rubbing his forehead. The bedroom door was closed, muffling the Saturday clink and giggle of his children at lunch. His chief of operations was on the gray, secure phone, the line that rang louder and sharper and made his heart beat fast.

The report came from the war room: The bomb was falling.

Lt. Gen. Moshe Yaalon stared at the files on his floor, working out two plans: 1) If they die. 2) If they don't. The bomb -- the one he'd been arguing over and deliberating all day -- was plunging 10,000 feet from an Israeli F-16 toward a Palestinian house in the Gaza Strip, where guests sat, eating rice and boiled chicken. Yaalon was hoping, he recalled in an interview, that it would be their last lunch. With targeted killings, it was rarely that simple.

It was Sept. 6, 2003, a time -- much like today -- of open warfare between Israel and Hamas, which Israel, the United States and Europe have labeled a terrorist group, and which now controls the Palestinian Authority. Eight Hamas leaders had gathered to plan terrorist attacks, Israeli intelligence reported.

"It was like bin Laden, Zarqawi and Zawahiri in a meeting, and having the capability to hit them," said Lt. Gen. Dan Halutz, then the air force chief, and now the military chief of staff.

The Hamas leaders had gathered in a private home, in a crowded neighborhood, when the children were out of school. A massive strike would mean civilian casualties. "We had to decide if we're going to take them out or not," said Halutz, who said he supervised 80 to 100 targeted killings as head of the air force, "with a 90 percent success rate."

In Israel, targeted killing has become a select weapon. In Lebanon last month, Israel targeted a bunker that officials believed held Hezbollah's leadership, pounding it with 23 tons of explosives. The hit list in Gaza, Halutz said in an interview, consists of 15 names.

"It is the most important, the most important, method of fighting terror," Halutz said.

It is also, arguably, the most morally complicated. Since the beginning of 2006, Israel has targeted and killed 18 Palestinian fighters, according to B'Tselem, an Israeli human rights organization. Fifteen civilians were also killed,

the group said.

"We face a tragic dilemma," said Maj. Gen. Amos Yadlin, chief of military intelligence. "A terrorist is going to enter a restaurant and blow up 20 people. But if we blow up his car, three innocent people in the car will die. How do we explain it to ourselves?"

One morning in 2002, Yadlin recalled, he "woke up horrified" to learn that 15 Palestinian civilians had been killed in an operation. That afternoon, Yadlin called Asa Kasher, a philosophy professor, and began working on ethical guidelines for fighting terrorism. They also asked a mathematician to write a formula to determine acceptable civilian casualties per dead terrorist.

On Sept. 6, a year later, when Israel had the chance to destroy the Hamas leadership, security officials clashed profoundly over the algebra of assassination. Two officials who have been called Israel's leaders in combating terrorism took opposite sides. Avi Dichter, then the head of Shin Bet, Israel's internal security agency, pushed for an all-out assault against the Hamas gathering. "They're the terrorist dream team," Dichter argued.

But for Yaalon, military chief of staff from 2002 to 2005, the Talmudic precept, "If he comes to kill you, kill him first," conflicted with a Biblical commandment, "Thou shall not kill."

Three years later, the men -- much like the society they come from -- are still engaged in debate. "It's still open between us," Dichter said, throwing a scolding look at Yaalon, during a December 2005 forum at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. "This isn't settled."

Afterward, in an interview, Yaalon looked out the window and said with a sigh: "There are no good answers."

As chief of staff, Yaalon carried a pad called "the Notebook." Targets were drawn from the pool of names in the pad, a number that ranged from 300 to 1,000 wanted men, he said. Every militant group is color-coded -- red, black, green. When a target was hit, Yaalon drew an X across his page.

"It's the lives of Israelis on one hand, the lives of Palestinians on the other," Yaalon said, balancing his palms like the scales of justice. He is a tall, balding man, with sloping shoulders, thick glasses and a taste for meditative poetry. As a youth, Yaalon joined the leftist kibbutz movement. Despite decades of fighting, he still seems startled by its viciousness.

"When I sign the orders," he said, "my hand trembles."

"This is impossible," Dichter said as he read the intelligence.

It was Friday morning, Sept. 5, 2003. Dichter had been handed a secret report stating that Hamas's senior bombmakers, strategists and developers of the Qassam rocket would meet the following day. They were marked men. They had surrounded themselves with children, lived in cellars, moved only at night and had stopped using cars or the phone.

"Why would they risk it?" Dichter recalled thinking, about their meeting. "We suspected it's not true." As head of Shin Bet, Dichter, a sturdy, dynamic, slate-eyed man, who prefers quips to poetry, was busy that morning with other targets: a Hamas fighter and a rocket operator.

Then another source called, confirming the gathering. Dichter mobilized a task force -- wiretapping experts, spy drone technicians, Palestinian informants -- and said: "Separate the signal from the static."

Dichter also notified Yaalon, the military chief of staff, who called Shaul Mofaz, then the defense minister. Yaalon asked Mofaz for permission to plan a hit. Mofaz recalled telling Yaalon: "This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity -- I approve." But Mofaz had seen the maps; the neighborhood was impenetrable. "I said, 'How are you going to do it?'"

In the prime minister's office, Maj. Gen. Yoav Gallant, the military secretary, informed Ariel Sharon. The prime minister banged the table with an open palm, Gallant said. "Get them," Sharon ordered. "This is the most important operation."

It was an operation, for Yaalon, that had evolved from an earlier meeting with an earlier prime minister. In the fall of 2000, when Palestinian-Israeli violence erupted, Yaalon approached Prime Minister Ehud Barak with an idea. Instead of imposing restrictions on all Palestinians, they should launch "surgical operations" against terrorists. Yaalon suggested setting up a joint command post for Shin Bet and the military.

"It wasn't something new -- we were in this business," Barak said in an interview. In 1973, in Beirut, wearing high

heels and a woman's wig, Barak helped gun down three of the terrorists who murdered 11 Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics. "I was a brunette, I had a strawberry blonde behind me," Barak said, with a small smile.

As military chief of staff in the early 1990s, Barak had organized undercover units called "Cherry" and "Samson," soldiers who dressed like Arabs and killed Palestinians suspected of violence.

When Barak reactivated targeted killings in 2000, he said, "the first were urgent, but after, I said, 'We need rules.'" An aide exhumed four typed pages in a dusty, plastic sleeve, Barak said. They were the rules of engagement for the avengers of the 1972 Munich massacre.

Barak also secretly asked Daniel Reisner, a legal adviser to Arab- Israeli peace talks, to determine whether targeted killings were legal. Reisner agonized for six weeks. "It was a feeling of -- what on Earth has happened?" Reisner recalled. "Instead of two states living amicably side by side, I have to write opinions on how and when we kill each other."

Reisner concluded it was legal, with six conditions: that arrest is impossible; that targets are combatants; that senior cabinet members approve each attack; that civilian casualties are minimized; that operations are limited to areas not under Israeli control; and that targets are identified as a future threat. Unlike prison sentences, targeted killing cannot be meted out as punishment for past behavior, Reisner said. In 2002, a military panel established that targeting cannot be for revenge, but only for deterrence. A panelist said it took six months and 20 meetings to reach that conclusion.

"It's not an eye for an eye," Dichter said. "It's having him for lunch before he has you for dinner."

By dinnertime on Sept. 5, 2003, Dichter's intelligence network had narrowed the location of the Hamas summit. Only two Hamas members were trusted enough by the leadership to host the meeting. One lived in a private home, the other in a 12-story apartment building. It was 8 p.m. on Friday when Dichter placed a conference call.

"I'll be back in a few minutes," Mofaz, the defense minister, said to his wife and four children on Friday evening, as he ran from the table to pick up the gray, coded phone. He had just recited the blessings over the wine and challah bread.

Yaalon, also on the conference call, said the air force was preparing a plan, "Operation Automatic Gear." For Israelis, 2003 had been a bloody summer. Terrorists blew themselves up at grocery stores, at bus stops and on buses, including one packed with children. Israel declared Hamas's political and military leaders fair game.

Mofaz told Dichter and Yaalon, "Tomorrow may be a historic day."

Yaalon recalled going to bed doubtful that they would attack; intelligence often unraveled. He said nothing about it to his wife. Dichter recalled going to bed confident he would find the location -- but what about the civilians in the 12-story building? He also said nothing about it to his wife.

By 6 a.m. on Sept. 6, Dichter was driving to the command center, a windowless room that glowed with computer screens and smelled of the Friday-night leftovers that agents had brought in -- chocolate rugelach and egg salad.

"The intelligence was good, the mood was good," he recalled. By tracking delivery trucks and following guards, Dichter said, Israeli agents determined that the Hamas meeting would take place at the single-family house, not the 12-story apartment building. Dichter felt relieved. Engineers ran computer analyses to prepare the house for destruction, assessing the cement, the structure and the size of the rooms.

Yaalon also woke up early and anxious. If Dichter was intuitive, Yaalon was analytical. The chief of staff jogged down to the Mediterranean and crashed into the waves. He swam out half a mile, pushing against the swells, and contemplated the day's decisions. "It kept my head busy with fresh oxygen," Yaalon said.

Almost every day, Yaalon had to decide who would live or die. "Who is a 'ticking bomb' ? Can we arrest him? Who is a priority -- this guy first, or this guy first?" Yaalon recalled. Once a week, military intelligence and Shin Bet proposed new names. At first, the list was limited to bombers themselves, but several years later it expanded to those who manufacture bombs and those who plan attacks.

"I called it 'cutting weeds.' I knew their names by heart," Yaalon said. How many did he kill? "Oh, hundreds, hundreds. I knew them. I had all the details with their pictures, maps, intelligence, on the table. Where does he live? What is his routine? Is he married? How many children did he have? If he had lots of kids, it crossed my mind."

It was hard to fathom, Yaalon said: "It became a routine to look into their eyes in the photo. In certain cases it's

unbelievable -- he looks so naive, a young guy looks nice, a baby face, especially a 16-year-old suicide bomber. It's beyond imagination."

Reisner, the legal expert, was often consulted at the meetings, which he described as "very, very trying. Especially when I said it's okay. I'd go back to my office and ask my deputy, 'Do you agree?' It's a frightening process to be involved in, sitting in a room and talking about killing someone. It's enough to make your skin crawl."

But once the evidence was presented, Reisner said, when they identified the cafe the terrorist was planning to blow up, or the movie theater he hoped to destroy, "you're reminded of what you're trying to avoid."

When the prime minister approves a target -- a requirement that can take months -- the name is transferred from the Notebook to a shortlist typed on a laminated card. Commanders carry the card in their pockets, along with bus passes and keys. Each target is assigned a file, with instructions on when and where he can be killed. Specialists mark up maps -- green lines for open roads where killings minimize civilian risk, red lines for congested areas to be avoided, Yaalon said. An operation can take 200 people, thousands of man hours, and cost \$1 million, Halutz said.

When a target is hit, Reisner said, the feeling is "complicated."

Not for Avi Dichter. "After each success, the only thought is, 'Okay, who's next?' We really have a bottleneck," the former Shin Bet chief said. One time they completed a killing at 5:30 a.m. "I said, 'What are we going to do for the rest of the day?' Nothing limits Hamas attacks, except terrorists still prefer their heads attached to their shoulders. If the M-16 delivers the message, the F-16 delivers it better."

On Saturday morning, Sept. 6, 2003, six F-16s were waiting off the coast of Gaza. Mofaz, the defense minister, sat in his office and changed the channel on his TV from CNN to live footage of Gaza from a reconnaissance drone. By noon, several Hamas leaders had arrived at the home of Marwan Abu Ras, a religion professor who was also a Hamas activist. The Israeli cameras zoomed in to catch the details.

"Some came on foot, some came by car, some parked far away and walked," Mofaz recalled. "They covered their faces with kaffiyehs and wore flowing clothes so they'd be hard to track."

A Shin Bet agent in the command center called out the identities of the men. "It was the 'Who's Who' of Hamas," said Gabi Ashkenazi, then Yaalon's deputy. "People we'd been hunting for years."

"It got intense," Yaalon recalled. "The reports -- 'Here comes Mohammed Deif.' 'Here comes Adnan al-Ghoul.' 'Here comes Ismail Haniyeh.' They said the names, I pictured each one, and I pictured blown-up buses and disco bombings, and shootings, murders of children, and kidnappings of soldiers."

Gallant, the prime minister's adviser, called Sharon at his ranch and told him about the extraordinary gathering. "We're talking about people responsible for killing hundreds of Israelis," Gallant said. "They're planning on killing hundreds more."

Sharon was setting up for his grandson's sixth birthday party. He asked, "Are the planes ready?"

In Gaza, the last Hamas member arrived in a white station wagon. Dichter himself had arrested him twice, "with these hands," he said, holding up thick, calloused fingers. It was Sheik Ahmed Yassin, a paraplegic and Hamas spiritual leader. As his wheelchair disappeared into the house, an agent called the sheik by his code name: "the Carcass."

Yaalon said to the air force chief: "Ready?"

Yaalon was directing the operation by conference call from his bedroom, where he sat in a blue tracksuit, scribbling notes. The air force chief was on the line, assessing the likely impact of the bomb. He said there was a problem.

A half-ton bomb wouldn't finish the job, the air force chief said. A one-ton bomb would blow out the neighboring apartment building, which was filled with dozens of families.

Immediately, Dichter and Yaalon began to argue. Dichter favored the heavy bomb; Yaalon wanted to abort the operation. They both had worked for decades in counter-terrorism, had served in the same secret commando unit and had, as Dichter put it, "traveled together without passports deep into Arab lands."

But they had emerged with different conclusions. For Dichter, "the barrel of terrorism has a bottom." If you captured or killed enough terrorists, Dichter believed, the problem would be solved. "They deserved a bomb that would send the dream team to hell," Dichter said. "I said, 'If we miss this opportunity, more Israelis will die.'"

Yaalon disagreed: "We won't get to the bottom of the barrel by killing terrorists. We'll get there through education. Dichter thinks we'll kill, kill, kill, kill, kill. That's it -- we've won. I don't accept that."

While Yaalon said the army had to consider the support of the Israeli public -- unlikely to favor civilian deaths -- and international legitimacy, Dichter said that from an operational point of view, a one-ton bomb made sense. "There is no fair fight against terrorists," Dichter said. "Never has been. Never will be."

The debate lasted for hours, observers said, and grew louder and larger. The prime minister's adviser, Gallant, sided with Dichter. The defense minister, Mofaz, sided with Yaalon. Dichter recalled: "If you didn't have a strong heart, you'd have a heart attack."

"How can we look in the eyes of our pilots if they kill innocent people?" Yaalon argued.

"And if the terrorists walk out alive, and tomorrow another bus explodes, how do we explain it to our people?" Dichter said.

It was a familiar debate. How many civilian casualties were acceptable? The mathematician whom the military had enlisted had failed to produce a formula. Reisner, who had stipulated that targeted killing was legal "only if all is done to minimize civilian casualties," served on a seven-member committee that also failed to agree on a standard they could use. The numbers the men had suggested averaged 3.14 civilian deaths per dead terrorist, Reisner recalled. If the civilians were children, the figure was smaller.

More than half of all targeted operations have been called off, a senior military source said, because of danger to noncombatants. The current air force chief, Maj. Gen. Elyezer Shkedy, said in an interview that collateral damage had been decreasing from one civilian death per assassination in 2002 to one civilian death for every 25 terrorists killed in 2005. One reason was technology, Yaalon said. At first, Apache helicopters fired Hellfire antitank missiles, he said. Yaalon asked Rafael Armament Development Authority, a Defense Ministry affiliate, to manufacture smaller warheads.

"A person isn't a tank," said Avi Galor of Rafael, who supervises a team that is miniaturizing missiles. Rafael is developing "the Firefly," a warhead the size of a soda bottle. Galor said, "We want to kill terrorists -- and not little girls, and it's on CNN, and you can't explain it."

Israel Aircraft Industries, which makes spy drones, is trying to "close the sensor-to-shooter chain," or to compress the relay time, said a manager at the firm, Ofer Haruvi. He added, "Mistakes happen because the commander says shoot, and then the situation changes."

One senior intelligence official recalled watching in horror as a missile flew toward a target, while a woman approached the man. It was too late to divert the rocket, the Israeli said: "We were saying, 'Whoa! Where is she going? Move away! Move away!' " An instant later, the man was killed, the woman, wounded.

In 2006, despite improved technology, civilian casualties in Gaza have risen. David Siegel, a government spokesman, said the air force launched three times as many targeted attacks in the first eight months of 2006 as it had in all of 2005, increasing the probability of mistakes.

Only once, Yaalon said, did he knowingly authorize a hit that would also kill a noncombatant, the wife of Salah Shehada. Shehada helped found Hamas's military wing, which had asserted responsibility for killing 16 soldiers and 220 Israeli civilians. In 2002, the air force dropped a one-ton bomb on his home. The blast also destroyed a neighboring house, which Yaalon said he had thought was empty. Fifteen civilians were killed, including nine children. It felt, Yaalon said, "like something heavy fell on my head."

When Yaalon makes this kind of decision, he said, it must pass "the mirror test": At the end of the day, will he be able to look at himself in the mirror?

The Shehada deaths, he said, shaped his thinking on Sept. 6, 2003. But his mother's life played a more important role. Yaalon's mother, a Holocaust survivor, was the only member of her family who was not killed by Nazis. She never talked about it, yet Yaalon absorbed a lesson from her.

"I learned, 'Remember and don't forget.' I drank it like mother's milk. It meant that Jews shouldn't be killed, but it also means that we don't kill others. You need strength to defend Israel, and on the other hand, to be a human," Yaalon said. "This is the tension, the heaviness of the decision."

On Sept. 6, Yaalon felt heavy, not happy, when the prime minister favored his recommendation over Dichter's: Mission aborted. Sharon called off the strike to decapitate Hamas, Yaalon said, because Sharon demanded "no

civilian casualties."

Yaalon stood up and opened the bedroom door.

"Where's Dad?" he could hear his daughter ask.

"He's busy saving the state of Israel," his son said.

Dichter was seething. "I'm not going to let it happen," he said, standing in the command center. The decision to hold fire, he recalled thinking, "was unprofessional and counterproductive." And he had done some math of his own. For every suicide bomber or terrorist caught, Dichter calculated, you saved 16 to 20 lives and 100 other people from being injured.

Dichter called the prime minister. "Arik, it's a huge mistake," Dichter said, using Sharon's nickname. "We must drop the bomb on this house. The arch-terrorists will never meet like this again."

"So try to convince Mofaz," Sharon said.

Dichter made a round of calls, he recalled: "I felt like the kid with the finger in the dam, fighting all the people."

Dichter's sense of urgency shaped his thinking on Sept. 6, 2003. But on a deeper level, his father's life played a role. Like Yaalon's mother, Dichter's father was a Holocaust survivor and the only member of his family who was not killed by the Nazis. Dichter's father never talked about it either, and yet Dichter absorbed a lesson from him.

"I swore since I can remember, I'm not going to let anyone kill a Jew, just because he's a Jew," Dichter said. He was named for his father's father, Abraham, who was murdered in Poland by the Nazis. "I swear to remember him, and never to forget."

On Sept. 6, as the 4 o'clock prayer time for Muslims approached, Dichter felt his chance to save Jews was slipping away. "Our sensors were watching the house, any minute the terror summit could end," he said.

Then an agent offered an intriguing piece of information. The house was three stories high. The curtains were closed on the third floor. Perhaps the Hamas leaders were meeting up there?

Gallant, the prime minister's adviser, called Sharon with a revised battle plan from Yaalon: The air force could drop a smaller bomb -- a quarter-ton -- destroy only the third floor and spare the civilians next door.

"I heard kids laughing in the background," Gallant recalled. Sharon was in the middle of his grandson's birthday party.

"What do you think?" Gallant said.

"Approved."

In two minutes, an F-16 roared over Abu Ras's house in Gaza. The house was surrounded by apartment buildings. In the war room, Halutz, then the air force chief, watched drone footage of the attack. The accidental Shehada deaths weighed on him: "When the bomb was falling, I was afraid it would miss," Halutz said.

For a combat pilot, the endless seconds between firing and impact can be terrifying, said Major Y. Prohibited by the military from giving his full name, Major Y said he has performed 15 to 20 targeted killings from a Cobra attack helicopter.

"You see a small house on a video screen. I just say, 'Hit the target, hit the target, hit the target.' And then, pshew -- " He exhaled loudly, his blue eyes widening.

"Until you hit the target, you can barely breathe. You hope nothing comes into the cross hairs, like a person. When I take off my helmet, my hair is wet, my undershirt, soaked with sweat. You feel like you lost 20 pounds. I can't say the feelings are good, even on a successful mission. You feel bad, but you know what you did was necessary."

On Sept. 6, 2003, another pilot was on the mission, firing from the cockpit, as a voice from the command center boomed into his headphones.

"Did you hit it?" the general asked the F-16 pilot. The billowing smoke from the bomb obscured the screen in the war room. The generals couldn't see a thing.

"Whoa!" The generals shouted as coils of ash turned white to black.

Mofaz's military secretary, Brig. Gen. Michael Herzog, was phoning in reports to the defense minister.

"We did it -- a direct hit," Herzog told him.

A minute later, Herzog called again: "The results are unclear."

A minute later: "It seems people escaped alive."

Another "Whoa!" filled the war room, one of disappointment.

Dichter recalled: "We saw people running out of the house faster than Olympic runners."

For Abu Ras, the Hamas leader whose home had been bombed, "it felt like an earthquake. A big, black smoke," he said in an interview. His guests had sat down to lunch. "I was so happy to host them," Abu Ras said. "What was our crime? I'm an ordinary citizen, not a terrorist. We have no terrorists among the Palestinian people."

Haniyeh was serving rice to Yassin. Then an explosion shook the room, and Yassin looked at the ceiling. "Why all this dust? Where is it coming from?" said Yassin, who was lightly wounded in his hand along with another Hamas member and 12 neighbors.

Haniyeh laughed bitterly, "We are hit, Sheik."

But the men were gathered on the ground floor of the house. The quarter-ton bomb destroyed only the third floor. Abu Ras's wife and four children, on the second floor, survived. And the Hamas leadership was safe.

That evening, Yaalon's deputy, Ashkenazi, came home and slammed the door. He walked into the kitchen, he recalled. He kicked the wall.

"What happened?" his wife said, staring at him.

What happened, according to Gallant, the prime minister's adviser, was simple: "We blew it. You either attack or you don't."

Mofaz, the defense minister, recalled a colleague needling him that evening. "Boy, you made a mistake," the colleague said. Mofaz retorted: "We'll get the terrorists later, better not to kill 20 kids."

Today, Mofaz is sidelined, serving as the minister of transportation. Sharon suffered a stroke and lies in a coma. Gallant is a major general, commander of Israel's southern sector, directing operations in Gaza.

The Israelis did kill Ghoul, in October 2004, and Yassin, in March 2004 -- "a missile in his lap," said an Israeli general. Abu Ras, the Hamas host, bought a new home. In July, Deif, the master bombmaker, survived another attack. In February, Haniyeh was elected prime minister of the Palestinian Authority.

"When I see Haniyeh, I ask myself, how is he alive? He shouldn't be there," said Halutz, the former air force chief. Today, Halutz serves as Israel's top military commander.

"Three years later, I'd say we should have used the heaviest bomb to ensure this leadership would be eliminated, and to save Palestinian and Israeli lives," Halutz said. At the time though, Halutz thought they had made the moral decision.

"Three moral successes don't equal one operational success," Dichter said, rapping his desk with his wedding ring. "We failed. Period." Since Dichter left Shin Bet, he has risen in politics, and is serving as internal security minister. Hamas rockets have struck his home town near Gaza.

Yaalon, the chief of staff in 2003, is reportedly considering joining the Likud party, as a candidate for defense minister. He was bumped from his military post, observers say, among other reasons, for stating publicly that he thought Israel's withdrawal from Gaza in 2005 would lead to another war.

He is haunted by Sept. 6, 2003, especially now, given Hamas's rise to power.

The night of the failed operation, Yaalon sat with his wife watching the news, drinking mint tea from their garden. "We didn't talk about it. It was a very bad weekend," Yaalon said. "Until today I'm not sure if I was right. I thought about it again, and again, and again. All day long."

Yaalon had wanted to make the right decision, to "save the state of Israel," as his son had said. At midnight on Sept. 6, he recalled, he went to brush his teeth, and took a long, painful look at himself in the mirror. Then he watched the last newscast: Hamas supporters were marching, demanding revenge.

"You will pay a price for this crime," Yassin said of Ariel Sharon. Protesters waved giant green Hamas flags. They fired assault rifles into the air. They marveled at the miracle that their leaders had survived an Israeli airstrike.

Up and down the Gaza Strip, people repeated the phrase:

"Allah saved them."

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