

# A Bird's Eye View

Uri Avnery

May 26, 2012

(Based on my article "The main Effort" published in Haaretz , May 4. 2012.)

**O**N MAY 15, the anniversary of the founding of the State of Israel, its Arab citizens observed a day of mourning for the victims of the Naqba ("catastrophe") – the mass exodus of half the Palestinian people from the territory which became Israel.

Like every year, this aroused much fury. Tel Aviv University allowed Arab students to hold a meeting, which was attacked by ultra-right Jewish students. Haifa University forbade the meeting altogether. Some years ago the Knesset debated a "*Naqba Law*" that would have sent commemorators to prison for three years. This was later moderated to the withdrawal of government funds from institutions that mention the Naqba.

The Only Democracy in the Middle East may well be the only democracy in the world that forbids its citizens to remember a historical event. Forgetting is a national duty.

Trouble is, it's hard to forget the history of the "*Palestinian issue*", because it dominates our life. 65 years after the foundation of Israel, half the news in our media concern this one issue, directly or indirectly.

Just now, the South African government has decreed that all products of the West Bank settlements sold there must be clearly marked. This measure, already in force in Europe, was roundly condemned by our Foreign Minister, Avigdor Lieberman, as "*racist*" (look who's talking!). However, it joins a boycott initiated 15 years ago by my Israeli friends and me.

The new government coalition has declared that it will renew negotiations with the Palestinians (everybody knows that this is a hollow promise). A wave of murders and rapes is being attributed to Arabs (and African asylum seekers). All presidential candidates in Egypt promise to take up the fight for the Palestinians. Senior Israeli army officers have disclosed that 3500 Syrian and Iranian missiles, as well as tens of thousands in Hizbollah's South Lebanon, are ready to be launched against us because of Palestine. And so on, a daily list.

115 years after the foundation of the Zionist movement, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict dominates our news.

THE FOUNDING FATHERS of Zionism adopted the slogan "*a land without a people for a people without a land*" (coined much earlier by a British Christian Zionist). They believed the Promised Land to be empty. They knew, of course, that there were some people in the country, but the Zionists were Europeans, and for Europeans at the end of the 19th century, the heyday of imperialism and colonialism, colored people – brown, black, yellow, red or whatever - did not count as people.

When Theodor Herzl put forward the idea of a Jewish State, he was not thinking about Palestine but about an area in Argentina. He intended to empty this area of all its native popula-

tion – but only after they had killed all the snakes and dangerous beasts.

In his book "*Der Judenstaat*" there is no mention of Arabs – and not by accident. When Herzl wrote it, he was not yet thinking about this country. The country appears in the book only in a tiny chapter added at the last moment, titled "*Palestine or Argentina?*"

Therefore Herzl did not speak about evicting the Palestinian population. This would have been impossible anyway, since Herzl was asking the Ottoman sultan for a charter for Palestine. The Sultan was a Caliph, the spiritual head of all the world's Muslims. Herzl was too cautious to bring this subject up.

This explains the otherwise curious fact: the Zionist movement has never given a clear answer to its most basic question: ***how to create a Jewish state in a country inhabited by another people.*** This question has remained unresolved to this very day.

But only seemingly. Hidden somewhere underneath it all, on the fringes of the collective consciousness, Zionism always had an answer. It is so self-evident, that there was no need to think about it. Only few had the courage to express it openly. It is imprinted on the "*genetic code*" of the Zionist movement, so to speak, and its daughter, the State of Israel.

This code says: a Jewish State in all the Land of Israel. And therefore: total opposition to the creation of a Palestinian state – at any time, anywhere in the country, at all costs.

WHEN A strategist plans a war, he first of all defines its aim. That is the Main Effort. Every other effort must be considered accordingly. If it supports the main effort, it is acceptable. If it hurts the main effort, it must be rejected.

The Main Effort of the Zionist/Israeli movement is to achieve a Jewish State in all of Eretz Israel - the territory between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River. In other words: the prevention of an Arab Palestinian state.

When one grasps this, all the events of the last 115 years make sense. All the twists and turns, all the seeming contradictions and deviations, all the curious-looking decisions make perfect sense.

In a bird's eye view, the Zionist-Israeli policy looks like a river striving towards the sea. When it meets an obstacle, it goes around it. The path deviates to the right and to the left, sometimes even going backwards. But it perseveres with a wondrous determination towards its goal.

The guiding principle was to accept every compromise that gives us what we can get at any stage, but never let the final aim out of our sight.

This policy allows us to compromise about everything, except one: an Arab Palestinian state that would confirm the existence of an Arab Palestinian people.

All Israeli governments have fought this idea with all available means. In this respect there was no difference between David Ben-Gurion, who had a secret agreement with King Abdullah of Jordan to obstruct the setting up of the Palestinian state decreed by the UN General Assembly's 1947 resolution, and Menachem Begin, who made a separate peace with Anwar Sadat in order to get Egypt out of the Israeli-Palestinian war. Not to mention Golda Meir's famous dictum: "*There is no such thing as a Palestinian people*". Thousands of other decisions by successive Israeli governments have followed the same logic.

The only exception may be the Oslo agreement – which also did not mention a Palestinian state. After signing it, Yitzhak Rabin did not rush forwards to create such a state. Instead, he stopped in his tracks as if stunned by his own audacity. He hesitated, dithered, until the inevitable Zionist counter-attack gathered momentum and put an end to his effort - and his life.

THE PRESENT struggle over the settlements is an integral part of this process. The main aim of the settlers is to make a Palestinian state impossible. All Israeli governments have supported them, openly or covertly. They are, of course, illegal under international law, but many of them are also illegal under Israeli law. These are variously called "illegal", "unlawful", "unpermitted" and so forth. Israel's august Supreme Court has ordered the removal of several of them and seen its rulings ignored by the government.

The settlers assert that not a single settlement has been set up without secret government consent. And indeed, all the "unlawful" settlements have been connected at once to the water and electricity grids, special new roads have been built for them and the army has rushed to defend them – indeed the Israel Defense Forces have long ago become the Settlements Defense Forces. Lawyers and shysters galore have been employed to expropriate huge tracts of Palestinian land. One famous woman lawyer discovered a forgotten Ottoman law which says that if you shout from the edge of a village, all the land where the shout cannot be heard belongs to the Sultan. Since the Israeli government is the heir of the Jordanian government, which was the heir of the Sultan, this land belongs to the Israeli government, which turns it over to the settlers. (This is not a joke!)

While the Israeli-Palestinian conflict seems in abeyance and "nothing happens", it is really going on with full force in the only

battlefield that matters: the settlement enterprise. Everything else is marginal, like the awesome prospect of an Israeli attack on Iran. As I have been saying all along: that will never happen. It is a part of the effort to divert attention from the Two-State Solution, the only peaceful solution there is.

WHERE IS the negation of the Palestinian state leading to?

Logically, it can only lead to an apartheid state in the entire country between the Mediterranean and the Jordan. In the long run, that would be untenable, leading to an Arab-majority "bi-national" state, which would be totally unacceptable to almost all Israeli Jews. So what is left?

The only conceivable solution would be transfer of all the Arabs to the other side of the Jordan. In some ultra-right circles, this is openly talked about. The Jordanian monarch is deadly afraid of it.

Population transfer already happened in 1948. It is still a point of debate whether this was done deliberately. In the first part of the war, it was clearly a military necessity (and practiced by both sides). Later on, it became more deliberate. But the main point is that the refugees were not allowed back when the hostilities were over. On the contrary, some villages were emptied and destroyed even later. Everybody acted under the invisible directive of the Main Effort, a direction so deeply ingrained in the collective consciousness, that it did not need any specific order.

But 1948 is long gone. The world has changed. What was tolerated from post-Holocaust brave little Israel would not be tolerated tomorrow from mighty, arrogant Israel. Today, it is a pipe-dream - like similar dreams on the other side that Israel would somehow disappear from the map.

This means that ethnic cleansing, the only alternative to the Two-State solution, is impossible. The Main Effort has run into a dead end.

IT HAS often been said that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a clash between an unstoppable force and an immovable object. This will dominate our lives and the lives of generations to come.

Unless we do something that looks almost impossible: to change the Main Effort, the historic direction of our state. Substitute for it a new national aim: peace and coexistence, reconciliation between the State of Israel and the State of Palestine.