

No, We Can't!

Uri Avnery

May 4, 2013

AN AMBASSADOR IS AN HONEST man sent abroad to lie for the good of his country, a British statesman famously wrote some 400 years ago. That is true, of course, for all diplomats.

The question is whether the diplomat lies only to others, or also to himself.

I am asking this these days when I follow the arduous efforts of John Kerry, the new American foreign secretary, to jump-start the Israeli-Arab “peace process”.

Kerry seems to be an honest man. A serious man. A patient man. But does he really believe that his endeavors will lead anywhere?

TRUE, THIS week Kerry did achieve a remarkable success.

A delegation of Arab foreign ministers, including the Palestinian, met with him in Washington. They were led by the Qatari prime minister—a relative of the Emir, of course—whose country is assuming a more and more prominent role in the Arab world.

At the meeting, the ministers emphasized that the Arab Peace Initiative is still valid.

This initiative, forged 10 years ago by the then Saudi Crown Prince (and present King) Abdullah, was endorsed by the entire Arab League in the March 2002 Summit Conference in Beirut. Yasser Arafat could not attend, because Prime Minister Ariel Sharon announced that if he left the country, he would not be allowed to return. But Arafat officially accepted the initiative.

It will be remembered that soon after the 1967 war, the Arab Summit Conference in Khartoum promulgated the Three Noes: No peace with Israel, No recognition of Israel, No negotiations with Israel. The new initiative was a total reversal of that resolution, which was born out of humiliation and despair.

The Saudi initiative was reaffirmed unanimously in the 2007 Summit Conference in Riyadh. All Arab rulers attended, including Mahmoud Abbas of Palestine who voted in favor, excluding only Muammar Gaddafi of Libya.

The initiative says unequivocally that all Arab countries would announce the end of the Arab-Israeli conflict, sign peace treaties with Israel, and institute normal relations with Israel. In return, Israel would withdraw to

the June 4, 1967 border (the Green Line). The State of Palestine, with its capital in East Jerusalem, would be established. The refugee problem would be solved by agreement (meaning agreement with Israel).

As I wrote at the time, if anyone had told us in May 1967 that the Arab world would make such an offer, they would have been locked up in an institution for the mentally ill. But those of us who advocated the acceptance of the Arab initiative were branded as traitors.

In his conference with the Arab ministers this week, John Kerry succeeded in pushing them a step further. They agreed to add that the 1967 Green Line may be changed by swaps of territories. This means that the large settlements along the border, where the great majority of the settlers reside, would be annexed to Israel, in return for largely inferior Israeli land.

WHEN THE initiative was first aired, the Israeli government was desperately looking for a way out.

The first excuse that sprang to mind—then as always—was the refugee problem. It is easy to create panic in Israel with the nightmare of millions of refugees “flooding” Israel, putting an end to the Jewishness of the Jewish State.

Sharon, the Prime Minister at the time, willfully ignored the crucial clause inserted by the Saudis into their plan: that there would be an “agreed” solution. This clearly means that Israel was accorded the right to veto any solution. In practice, this would amount to the return of a symbolic number, if any at all.

Why did the initiative mention the refugees at all? Well, no Arab could possibly publish a peace plan that did not mention them. Even so, the Lebanese objected to the clause, because it would leave the refugees in Lebanon.

But the refugees are always a useful bogeyman. Then and now.

ONE DAY before the original Saudi initiative was submitted to the Beirut Summit, on March 27, 2002, something terrible happened: Hamas terrorists carried out a massacre in Netanya, with 40 dead and hundreds wounded. It was on the eve of Passover, the joyous Jewish holiday.

The Israeli public was inflamed. Sharon immediately responded that in these circumstances, the Arab peace initiative would not even be considered. Never mind that the

atrocities were committed by Hamas with the express purpose of sabotaging the Saudi initiative and undermining Arafat, who supported it. Sharon mendaciously blamed Arafat for the bloody deed, and that was that.

Curiously—or maybe not—a similar thing happened this week. On the very day the upgraded Arab initiative was published, a young Palestinian killed a settler with a knife at a checkpoint—the first Jew killed in the West Bank for more than a year and a half.

The victim, Evyatar Borowsky, was the 31-year old father of five children—usual for an orthodox man. He was a resident of the Yitzhar settlement near Nablus, perhaps the most extreme anti-Arab settlement in the entire West Bank. He looked like the quintessential ideological settler—blond, bearded, with East-European looks, long payot (side locks), and a large colored kippah. The perpetrator came from the Palestinian town of Tulkarm. He was shot and severely injured. He is now in an Israeli hospital.

Before the incident, Netanyahu had been hard at work to formulate a statement that would reject the peace initiative without insulting the Americans. After the killing, he decided that there was no need. The terrorist has done his job. (As an old Jewish saying goes: “The work of the righteous one is done by others”.)

Justice Minister Tzipi Livni, who is in charge of the (nonexistent) negotiations with the Palestinians, and President Shimon Peres welcomed the Arab statement. But Livni’s influence in the government is next to nil, and Peres is by now a joke in Israel.

IF THE American Secretary of State really believes that he can nudge our government slowly and gradually to “meaningful” negotiation with the Palestinians, he is deluding himself. If he does not believe it, he is trying to delude others.

There have been no real negotiations with the Palestinians since Ehud Barak came back from the Camp David conference in 2000, waving the slogan “*We Have No Partner for Peace*”. With this he destroyed the Israeli peace movement and brought Ariel Sharon to power.

Before that, there were no real negotiations either. Yitzhak Shamir announced that he was happy to nego-

ciate for ever.¹ Documents were produced and gathered dust, conferences were photographed and forgotten, agreements were signed and made no real difference. Nothing moved. Nothing—apart from settlement activity, that is.

Why? How would anyone entertain the belief that from now on everything would be different?

Kerry will elicit some more words from the Arabs. Some more promises from Netanyahu. There may even be a festive opening of a new round of negotiations, a great victory for President Obama and Kerry.

But nothing will change. Negotiations will just drag on. And on. And on.

For the same reason that there has been no movement in the past, there will be no movement in the future—unless...

UNLESS. UNLESS Obama takes the bull by the horns, which, it seems, he is exceedingly unwilling to do.

The horns of the bull are the horns of the dilemma, on which Israel is sitting.

It is the historic choice facing us: Greater Israel or Peace?

Peace, any conceivable peace, the very basis of the Arab Initiative, means Israel’s withdrawal from the occupied Palestinian territories and the establishment of the State of Palestine in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, with its capital in East Jerusalem. No ifs, no buts, no perhapses.

The opposite of peace is Israeli rule over the whole of the land between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River, in one form or another.²

If President Obama has the will and the power to compel the government of Israel to make this historic decision and choose peace, may the political price for the president be as it may, then he should proceed.

If this will and this power do not exist, the whole great peace effort is an exercise in deception, and honorable men should not indulge in it.

They should honestly face the two sides and the world and tell them:

No, We Can’t.

¹Shamir, by the way, declared that it was a virtue to “*lie for the fatherland*”.

²Lately, some despairing Israeli peaceniks have been embracing this, in the absurd hope that in this Greater Israel, Israel would grant equality to the Arabs.