

One Word

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IN ONE word: Bravo!

The news about the reconciliation agreement between Fatah and Hamas is good for peace. If the final difficulties are ironed out and a full agreement is signed by the two leaders, it will be a huge step forward for the Palestinians – and for us.

There is no sense in making peace with half a people. Making peace with the entire Palestinian people may be more difficult, but will be infinitely more fruitful.

Therefore: Bravo!

Binyamin Netanyahu also says Bravo. Since the government of Israel has declared Hamas a terrorist organization with whom there will be no dealings whatsoever, Netanyahu can now put an end to any talk about peace negotiations with the Palestinian Authority. What, peace with a Palestinian government that includes terrorists? Never! End of discussion.

Two bravos, but such a difference.

THE ISRAELI debate about Arab unity goes back a long way. It already started in the early fifties, when the idea of pan-Arab unity raised its head. Gamal Abd-al-Nasser hoisted this banner in Egypt, and the pan-Arab Baath movement became a force in several countries (long before it degenerated into local Mafias in Iraq and Syria).

Nahum Goldman, President of the World Zionist Organization, argued that pan-Arab unity was good for Israel. He believed that peace was necessary for the existence of Israel, and that it would take all the Arab countries together to have the courage to make it.

David Ben-Gurion, Israel's Prime Minister, thought that peace was bad for Israel, at least until Zionism had achieved all its (publicly undefined) goals. In a state of war, unity among Arabs was a danger that had to be prevented at all costs.

Goldman, the most brilliant coward I ever knew, did not have the courage of his convictions. Ben-Gurion was far less brilliant, but much more determined.

He won.

NOW WE have the same problem all over again.

Netanyahu and his band of peace saboteurs want to prevent Palestinian unity at all costs. They do not want peace, because peace would prevent Israel from achieving the Zionist goals, as they conceive them: a Jewish state in all of historical Palestine, from the sea to the Jordan River (at least). The conflict is going to last for a long, long time to come, and the more divided the enemy, the better.

As a matter of fact, the very emergence of Hamas was influenced by this calculation. The Israeli occupation authorities deliberately encouraged the Islamic movement, which later became Hamas, as a counterweight to the secular nationalist Fatah, which was then conceived as the main enemy.

Later, the Israeli government deliberately fostered the division between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip by violating the

Oslo agreement and refusing to open the four "safe passages" between the two territories provided for in the agreement. Not one was open for a single day. The geographical separation brought about the political one.

When Hamas won the January 2006 Palestinian elections, surprising everybody including itself, the Israeli government declared that it would have no dealings with any Palestinian government in which Hamas was represented. It ordered – there is no other word – the US and EU governments to follow suit. Thus the Palestinian Unity Government was brought down.

The next step was an Israeli-American effort to install a strongman of their choosing as dictator of the Gaza Strip, the bulwark of Hamas. The chosen hero was Muhammad Dahlan, a local chieftain. It was not a very good choice – the Israeli security chief recently disclosed that Dahlan had collapsed sobbing into his arms. After a short battle, Hamas took direct control of the Gaza Strip.

A FRATRICIDAL split in a liberation movement is not an exception. It is almost the rule.

The Irish revolutionary movement was an outstanding example. In this country we had the fight between the Hagana and the Irgun, which at times became violent and very ugly. It was Menachem Begin, then the Irgun commander, who prevented a full-fledged civil war.

The Palestinian people, with all the odds against them, can hardly afford such a disaster. The split has generated intense mutual hatred between comrades who spent time in Israeli prison together. Hamas accused the Palestinian Authority – with some justification – of cooperating with the Israeli government against them, urging the Israelis and the Egyptians to tighten the brutal blockade against the Gaza Strip, even preventing a deal for the release of the Israeli prisoner-of-war, Gilad Shalit, in order to block the release of Hamas activists and their return to the West Bank. Many Hamas activists suffer in Palestinian prisons, and the lot of Fatah activists in the Gaza Strip is no more joyous.

Yet both Fatah and Hamas are minorities in Palestine. The great mass of the Palestinian people desperately want unity and a joint struggle to end the occupation. If the final reconciliation agreement is signed by Mahmoud Abbas and Khalid Meshaal, Palestinians everywhere will be jubilant.

BINYAMIN NETANYAHU is jubilant already. The ink was not yet dry on the preliminary agreement initialed in Cairo, when Netanyahu made a solemn speech on TV, something like an address to the nation after an historic event.

"You have to choose between us and Hamas," he told the Palestinian Authority. That would not be too difficult – one the one side a brutal occupation regime, on the other Palestinian brothers with a different ideology.

But this stupid threat was not the main point of the statement. What Netanyahu told us was that there would be no dealings

with a Palestinian Authority connected in any way with the “terrorist Hamas”.

The whole thing is a huge relief for Netanyahu. He has been invited by the new Republican masters to address the US Congress next month and had nothing to say. Nor had he anything to offer the UN, which is about to recognize the State of Palestine this coming September. Now he has: peace is impossible, all Palestinians are terrorists who want to throw us into the sea. Ergo: no peace, no negotiations, no nothing.

IF ONE really wants peace, the message should of course be quite different.

Hamas is a part of Palestinian reality. Sure, it is extremist, but as the British have taught us many times, it is better to make peace with extremists than with moderates. Make peace with the moderates, and you must still deal with the extremists. Make peace with the extremists, and the business is finished.

Actually, Hamas is not quite as extreme as it likes to present itself. It has declared many times that it will accept a peace agreement based on the 1967 lines and signed by Mahmoud Abbas if it is ratified by the people in a referendum or a vote in parliament. Accepting the Palestinian Authority means accepting the Oslo agreement, on which the PA is based – including the mutual recognition of Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization. In Islam, as in all other religions, God’s word is definitely final, but it can be “interpreted” any way needed. Don’t we Jews know.

What made both sides more flexible? Both have lost their patrons – Fatah its Egyptian protector, Hosny Mubarak, and Hamas its Syrian protector, Bashar al-Assad, who cannot be relied upon anymore. That has brought both sides to face reality: Palestinians stand alone, so they had better unite.

For peace-oriented Israelis, it will be a great relief to deal with a united Palestinian people and with a united Palestinian territory. Israel can do a lot to help this along: open at long last an extraterritorial free passage between the West Bank and Gaza, put an end to the stupid and cruel blockade of the Gaza Strip (which has become even more idiotic with the elimination of the Egyptian collaborator), let the Gazans open their port, airport and borders. Israel must accept the fact that religious elements are now a part of the political scene all over the Arab world. They will become institutionalized and, probably, far more “moderate”. That is part of the new reality in the Arab world.

The emergence of Palestinian unity should be welcomed by Israel, as well as by the European nations and the United States. They should get ready to recognize the State of Palestine within the 1967 borders. They should encourage the holding of free and democratic Palestinian elections and accept their results, whatever they may be.

The wind of the Arab Spring is blowing in Palestine too. Bravo!