

Sad and Happy

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“WILL THIS BE the happiest day of your life?” a local interviewer asked me, referring to the approaching recognition of the State of Palestine by the UN.

I was taken by surprise. “Why would that be?” I asked.

“Well, for 62 years you have advocated the establishment of a Palestinian state next to Israel, and here it comes!”

“If I were a Palestinian, I would probably be happy,” I said, “But as an Israeli, I am rather sad.”

LET ME explain.

I came out of the 1948 war with four solid convictions:

- (1) There exists a Palestinian people, though the name Palestine had been wiped off the map.
- (2) It is with this Palestinian people that we must make peace.
- (3) Peace will be impossible unless the Palestinians are allowed to set up their state next to Israel.
- (4) Without peace, Israel will not be the model state we had been dreaming about in the trenches, but something very different.

While recovering from my wounds and still in uniform, I met with several young people, Arabs and Jews, to plot our course. We were very optimistic. Now everything seemed possible.

What we were thinking about was a great act of fraternization. Jews and Arabs had fought each other valiantly, each fighting for what they considered their national rights. Now the time had come to reach out for peace.

The idea of peace between two gallant fighters after the battle is as old as Semitic culture. In the epic written more than 3000 years ago, Gilgamesh, king of Uruk (in today's Iraq) fights against the wild Enkidu, his equal in strength and courage, and after the epic fight they become blood brothers.

We had fought hard and had won. The Palestinians had lost everything. The part of Palestine that had been allotted by the UN to their state had been gobbled up by Israel, Jordan and Egypt, leaving nothing for them. Half the Palestinian people had been driven from their homes and become refugees.

That was the time, we thought, for the victor to stun the world with an act of magnanimity and wisdom, offering to help the Palestinians to set up their state in return for peace. Thus we could forge a friendship that would last for generations.

18 years later I brought this vision up again in similar circumstances. We had won a stunning victory against the Arab armies in the Six-Day war, the Middle East was in a state of shock. An Israeli offer to the Palestinians to establish their state would have electrified the region.

I AM telling this story (again) in order to make one point: when the “Two-State Solution” was conceived for the first time

after 1948, it was as an idea of reconciliation, fraternization and mutual respect.

We envisaged two states living closely together, with borders open to the free movement of people and goods. Jerusalem, the joint capital, would symbolize the spirit of the historic change. Palestine would become the bridge between the new Israel and the Arab world, united for the common good. We spoke of a “Semitic Union” long before the European Union became a reality.

When the Two-State Solution made its extraordinary march from the vision of a handful of outsiders (or crazies) to a worldwide consensus, it was this context in which it was viewed. Not a plot against Israel, but the only viable basis for real peace.

This vision was firmly rejected by David Ben-Gurion, then the undisputed leader of Israel. He was busy distributing new Jewish immigrants across the vast areas expropriated from the Arabs, and he did not believe in peace with the Arabs anyhow. He set the course that successive Israeli governments, including the present one, have followed ever since.

On the Arab side, there was always support for this vision. Already at the Lausanne Conference in 1949, an unofficial Palestinian delegation appeared and secretly offered to start direct negotiations, but they were roughly rebuffed by the Israeli delegate, Eliyahu Sasson, on direct orders from Ben-Gurion (as I heard from him later).

Yasser Arafat told me several times – from 1982 to his death in 2004 – that he would support a “Benelux” solution (on the model of the union between Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxemburg), which would include Israel, Palestine and Jordan (“and perhaps Lebanon too, why not?”)

PEOPLE SPEAK about all the opportunities for peace missed by Israel throughout the years. That is nonsense: you can miss opportunities on the way to a goal that you desire, but not on the way to something you abhor.

Ben-Gurion saw an independent Palestinian state as a mortal danger to Israel. So he made a secret deal with King Abdullah I, dividing between them the territory allocated by the UN partition plan to the Arab Palestinian state. All Ben-Gurion's successors inherited the same dogma: that a Palestinian state would be a terrible danger. Therefore they opted for the so-called “Jordanian option” – keeping what is left of Palestine under the heel of the Jordanian monarch, who is no Palestinian (nor even Jordanian - his family came from Mecca).

This week, the present Jordanian ruler, Abdullah II, flew into a rage when told that yet another Israeli former general, Uzi Dayan, had again proposed turning Jordan into Palestine, with the West Bank and the Gaza Strip as “provinces” of the Hashemite kingdom. This Dayan is, unlike his late cousin, Moshe, a pompous fool, but even a speech by such a person infuriates the king, who is mortally afraid of an influx of Pales-

tinians driven from the West Bank into Jordan.

Three days ago, Binyamin Netanyahu told Cathy Ashton, the pathetic “foreign secretary” of the European Union, that he would agree to anything short of Palestinian statehood. That may sound strange, in view of the “historic” speech he made less than two years ago, in which he expressed his support for the Two-State Solution.¹

In the few remaining weeks before the UN vote, our government will fight tooth and nail against a Palestinian state, supported by the full might of the US. This week Hillary Clinton trumped even her own rhetorical record when she announced that the US supports the Two-State Solution and therefore opposes any UN vote recognizing a Palestinian state.

APART FROM the dire threats of what will happen after the UN vote for a Palestinian state, Israeli and American leaders assure us that such a vote will make no difference at all.

If so, why fight it?

Of course it will make a difference. The occupation will go on, but it will be the occupation of one state by another. In history, symbols count. The fact that the vast majority of the world’s nations will have recognized the State of Palestine will be another step towards gaining freedom for Palestine.

What will happen the day after? Our army has already announced that it has finished preparations for huge Palestinian demonstrations that will attack the settlements. The settlers will be called upon to mobilize their “quick-reaction teams” to confront the demonstrators, thus fulfilling the prophecies of a “bloodbath”. After that the army will move in, pulling many battalions of regular troops from other tasks and calling up reserve units.

A few weeks ago I pointed to ominous signs that sharpshooters would be employed to turn peaceful demonstrations

into something very different, as happened during the second intifada. This week this was officially confirmed: sharpshooters will be employed to defend the settlements.

All this amounts to a war plan for the settlements. To put it simply: a war to decide whether the West Bank belongs to the Palestinians or the settlers.

In an almost comical turn of events, the army is also providing means of crowd dispersal to the Palestinian security forces trained by the Americans. The occupation authorities expect these Palestinian forces to protect the settlements against their compatriots. Since these are the armed forces of the future Palestinian state, which is opposed by Israel, it all sounds a bit bewildering.

According to the army, the Palestinians will get rubber-coated bullets and tear gas, but not the “Skunk”.

The Skunk is a device that produces an unbearable stench which attaches itself to the peaceful demonstrators and will not leave them for a long time. I am afraid that when this chapter comes to an end, the stench will attach itself to our side, and that we shall not get rid of it for a long time indeed.

LET’S GIVE free rein to our imagination for just one minute.

Imagine that in the coming UN debate something incredible happens: the Israeli delegate declares that after due consideration Israel has decided to vote for recognition of the state of Palestine.

The assembly would gape in disbelief. After a moment of silence, wild applause would break out. The world would be electrified. For days, the world media would speak of nothing else.

The minute of imagination has passed. Back to reality. Back to the Skunk.

¹Perhaps he was thinking of the State of Israel and the State of the Settlers.