

The Dwarfs

Uri Avnery

March 12, 2011

JERUSALEM IS abuzz with brilliant new ideas. The brightest minds of our political establishment are grappling with the problems created by the ongoing Arab revolution that is reshaping the landscape around us.

Here is the latest crop of mind-bogglingly innovative ideas:

Minister of Defense Ehud Barak has announced that he is going to ask the US for a grant of another 20 billion dollars for more state-of-the-art fighter planes, missile boats, a submarine, troop carriers and so on .

Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu had his picture taken surrounded by female soldiers – like Muammar Qaddafi in the good old days – looking beyond the Jordan River and announcing that the Israeli army would never ever leave the Jordan valley. According to him, this occupied strip of land is Israel’s vital “security border”.

This slogan is as old as the occupation itself. It was part of the celebrated Allon Plan, which was designed to surround the West Bank with Israeli territory. Incidentally, the father of the plan, Yigal Allon, was also a leader of the Kibbutz movement, and the Jordan valley looked to him like an ideal area for new Kibbutzim – it is flat, well watered and was sparsely populated.

However, times have changed. When Allon was a legendary commander in the 1948 war, he did not even dream of missiles. Today, missiles launched from beyond the Jordan can easily reach my home in Tel Aviv. When Netanyahu declares that we need the Jordan valley in order to stop the Arabs from smuggling missiles into the West Bank, he is, well, a little bit behind the times.

When the politicians bravely face the new world, the army dares not lag behind. This week, several division commanders announced that they were preparing for Tahrir-style “non-violent mass uprisings” in the West Bank. Troops are trained, riot control means are stocked. Our glorious army is being prepared for yet another colonial police job.

To reinforce the mental vigor of the leadership, Netanyahu has now mobilized an awesome intellect: he has appointed General Yaakov Amidror as Chief of the National Security Council. Amidror, the highest ranking kippa-wearing officer in the army, has never hidden his ultra-ultra nationalist views, including his total opposition to a Palestinian state and peace in general. He is, by the way, the officer who recently mentioned approvingly that some armies put “a bullet into the heads” of soldiers who don’t rise to storm an enemy position.

It is only fitting that Netanyahu invited the National Front party, which includes openly fascist elements, to join his government this week. They refused, because Netanyahu is not extreme enough for them.

In the meantime, a dozen top politicians, from Avigdor Lieberman down, have been dusting off moribund plans for “interim agreements” – old merchandise sitting sadly on the

shelves, with no buyers in sight.

All in all: political dwarfs, confronted with a revolutionary new reality which they can neither understand nor cope with. (This is not to insult real-life dwarfs, who are, of course, as intelligent as anyone else.)

WITH THIS bunch of leaders, it is almost utopian to ask what we could and should do to attune ourselves to the new geopolitical reality.

Assuming that the Arab world, or a large part of it, is on the road to democracy and social progress, how will this affect our future?

Can we build bridges to such progressive, multi-party societies? Can we persuade them to accept us as a legitimate part of the region? Can we participate in the political and economic emergence of a “New Middle East”?

I believe we can. But the absolute, unalterable precondition is that we make peace with the Palestinian people.

It is the unshakable – and self-fulfilling – conviction of the entire Israeli establishment that this is impossible. They are quite right – as long as they are in charge, it is indeed impossible. But with another leadership, will things be different?

If both sides – and this depends heavily on Israel, the incomparably stronger side - really want peace, peace is there for the asking. All the requirements are lying plainly on the table. They have been discussed endlessly. The points for compromise are clearly marked. It would need no more than a few weeks to work out the details. Borders, Jerusalem, settlements, refugees, water, security – we all know by now what the solutions are. (I and others have enumerated them several times.) What is lacking is the political will.

A peace agreement – signed by the PLO, ratified in a popular referendum, accepted by Hamas – will radically change the attitude of the Arab peoples in general towards Israel.

This is not simply a matter of form – it goes deep into the bedrock of national consciousness. Not one of the ongoing uprisings in the various Arab countries is anti-Israeli by nature. Nowhere do the Arab masses cry out for war. Indeed, the idea of war contradicts their basic aspirations: social progress, freedom, a standard of living which allows a life in dignity.

However, as long as the occupation of Palestinian territory goes on, the Arab masses will reject conciliation with Israel. Whatever the feelings of any particular Arab people towards the Palestinians – all Arabs feel profoundly obligated to help in the liberation of their fellow-Arabs. As an Egyptian leader once told me: “They are our poor relatives, and our tradition does not allow us to forsake a poor relative. It is a matter of honor.”

Therefore, Israel will crop up in every free election campaign in the Arab countries, and every party will feel obliged to condemn Israel.

ONE ARGUMENT against peace, endlessly repeated by

our official propaganda, is that Hamas will never accept it. The specter of Islamist movements in other countries winning democratic elections – as Hamas did in Palestine – is painted on the wall as a mortal danger.

It may be worthwhile remembering that Hamas was effectively created by Israel in the first place.

During the first decades of the occupation, the military governors forbade any kind of Palestinian political activity, even by those who were advocating peace with Israel. Activists were sent to prison. There was only one exception: Islamists. Not only was it impossible to prevent them from assembling in the mosques – the only public space left open – but the military governors were told to encourage Islamist organizations, as a counterforce to the PLO, which was considered the main enemy. The PLO was and remains non-religious, and many Christians have played a significant role in it.

That was, of course, a stupid idea, typical of the short-sightedness of our political and military leaders, as far as Arab affairs are concerned. On the outbreak of the first intifada, the Islamist movement constituted itself as Hamas (“Islamic Resistance Movement”) and took up the fight.

The emergence of Hizbollah was also a result of Israeli actions. When Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982 in order to destroy the PLO mini-state in the South of the country, it created a vacuum that was soon filled by the newly founded Shiite Party of God, Hizbollah.

Both Hamas and Hizbollah aspire to power in their respective countries. That is their main aim. For both, the fight against Israel is more a means than an end. Once peace is achieved, their energies will be directed to the struggle for power in their own countries.

Will Hamas accept peace? It has declared as much in a roundabout way: if the Palestinian Authority makes peace, they have declared, and if the peace agreement is ratified by a Palestinian referendum, Hamas will accept it as an expression of the people’s will. The same goes for all the Islamic movements in the various Arab countries, with the exception of al-Qaeda and the likes, which are not nationally-based political parties but international conspiratorial organizations.

With a peace treaty freely accepted by the Palestinians as the satisfaction of their national aspirations, any intervention by other Arab countries will become redundant, if not downright ridiculous. Hizbollah, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and similar national religious organizations will concentrate their efforts on gaining power within the new democratic structures.

With this obstacle removed, Israel will be judged by the Arab masses for what it is, at that time. We shall have the historic chance to take part in the reshaping of the entire region. Our deeds will speak.

MORE THAN 50 years ago, the then Crown Prince of Morocco, Moulay Hassan - the later king Hassan II - made a historic proposal: to invite Israel to join the Arab League. At the time, the idea sounded outlandish and was soon forgotten. (Except by the king himself, who reminded me of it when he received me secretly in 1981.)

Today, with a new Arab world in sight, this utopian vision is suddenly looking more realistic. Yes, after peace, with the free and sovereign State of Palestine becoming a full member of the UN, a reformed regional structure, including Israel, perhaps Turkey and, in due course, Iran, will move into the realm of reality.

A region with open borders, with commercial activity and economic cooperation flourishing from Marrakesh to Mosul, from Haifa to Aden, within a generation or two – yes, that is one of the possibilities opened by the current earth-shaking events.

SUCH A development would need, of course, a total change in our basic concepts, some of which are at least as old as Zionism itself.

It will not happen as long as our political and intellectual life is dominated by Netanyahu, Lieberman, Barak, Eli Yishai, Tzipi Livni, Shimon Peres and their ilk. The stage must be cleared of this whole crop of dwarfs.

Can this happen? Will it happen? “Realists” will shake their heads - as they did before the Germans tore down their wall, before Boris Yeltsin climbed on that tank and before the Americans elected an Afro-American president whose middle name is Hussein.