

The March of Folly

Uri Avnery

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NOTHING COULD BE more scary than the thought that this duo – Binyamin Netanyahu and Ehud Barak – is in a position to start a war, the dimensions and outcome of which are incalculable.

It's scary not only because of their ideological fixations and mental outlook, but also because of the level of their intelligence.

The last month gave us a small sample. By itself it was but a passing episode. But as an illustration of their decision-making abilities, it was frightening enough.

THE ROUTINE conference of the Movement of Non-Aligned Nations was to take place in Tehran. 120 states promised to attend, many of them represented by their presidents or prime ministers.

This was bad news for the Israeli government, which has devoted much of its energies during the last three years to the strenuous effort to isolate Iran – while Iran was devoted to a no less strenuous effort to isolate Israel.

If the location of the conference was not bad enough, the United Nations Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon, announced that he would attend, too. And as if this was still not bad enough, the new president of Egypt, Mohamed Morsi, also promised to come.

Netanyahu was faced with a problem: how to react?

IF A wise expert had been consulted, he might have asked: why react at all?

The Non-Aligned Movement is an empty shell. It was created (or “founded”) 51 years ago, at the height of the Cold War, by Nehru of India, Tito of Yugoslavia, Sukarno of Indonesia and Abd-al-Nasser of Egypt. 120 nations joined. They wanted to steer a course between the American and the Soviet blocs.

Since then, circumstances have changed completely. The Soviets have disappeared, and the US is also not what it was. Tito, Nehru, Nasser and Sukarno are all dead. The Non-Aligned have no real function anymore. But it is much easier to set up an international organization than to disband it. Its secretariat provides jobs, its conferences provide photo opportunities, world leaders like to travel and schmooze.

If Netanyahu had kept quiet, chances are that the world media would have ignored the non-event altogether. CNN and Aljazeera might have devoted a full three minutes to it, out of courtesy, and that would have been that.

But for Netanyahu, keeping quiet is not an option. So he did something exceedingly foolish: he told Ban Ki-moon not to go to Tehran. More precisely: he ordered him not to go.

The aforementioned wise expert – if he existed – would have told Netanyahu: Don't! The Non-aligned make up more than 60% of the UN membership. Ban wants to be re-elected in due course, and he is not going to insult 120 voters, much as you

wouldn't want to insult 80 members of the Knesset. His predecessors have attended all former conferences. He cannot refuse now – especially not after you publicly ordered him around.

Then there was Morsi. What to do about him?

If another wise expert, this time on Egypt, had been asked, he would have given much the same advice: let it be.

Egypt wants to resume its role as the leader of the Arab world and as an actor on the international stage. The new president, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, certainly would not want to be seen giving in to Israeli pressure.

So, as the Hebrew saying goes, better to swallow a frog – even two frogs – then do something foolish.

BUT NETANYAHU couldn't possibly follow such advice. It's would be contrary to his nature. So he and his assistants proclaimed loudly – very loudly – that the 120 attending countries are supporting Iran's effort to annihilate Israel, and that Ban and Morsi are promoting a Second Holocaust.

Instead of isolating Iran, Netanyahu helped Iran to isolate Israel.

The more so as both Ban and Morsi used the Tehran stage to castigate the Iranian leadership and its Syrian allies. Ban condemned Ahmadinejad's denial of the holocaust as well as his proclaimed hopes for the disappearance of the “Zionist entity”. Morsi went even further and castigated the murderous Syrian regime, Iran's main ally.¹

THIS WHOLE episode is important only insofar as it illustrates the incredible folly of Netanyahu and his close advisers (all of them handpicked by his wife, Sarah, easily the most unpopular person in the country). They seem to be cut off from the real world and to live in an imagined world of their own.

In this imaginary world, Israel is the center of the universe, and Netanyahu can give orders to the leaders of the nations, from Barack Obama and Angela Merkel to Mohamed Morsi and Ban Ki-moon.

Well, we are not the center of the world. We have a lot of influence, owing in part to our history. We are a regional power, much beyond our actual size. But to be really effective, we need allies, moral standing and the support of international public opinion, just like everybody else. Without this, Netanyahu's pet project, to secure for himself a place in the history books by attacking Iran, cannot be carried out.

I know that many eyebrows were raised when I categorically stated that neither Israel nor the US would attack Iran. It seemed that I was risking my reputation – such as it is – while Netanyahu and Barak were preparing for the inevitable bombing run. When talk about the impending attack reached a crescendo, my few well-wishers were sincerely worried.

However, during the last few days, there has been an almost general admiration for his presence of mind. Whenever Morsi said in Arabic

¹This speech was broadcast live on Iranian television. The translator evoked “Syria”, the translator said in Farsi “Bahrain”.

imperceptible change of tone here. Netanyahu declared that the “family of nations” must lay down a “red line” and timetable for stopping Iran’s nuclear arms effort.

Translated into simple Hebrew: there will be no Israeli attack, unless approved by the US. Such approval is impossible before the coming US elections. It is highly unlikely afterwards, too, for the reasons I tried to set out. Geographical, military, political and economic circumstances make it impossible. Diplomacy is called for. A compromise based on mutual interests and respect may be the best outcome.

An Israeli commentator has made the interesting suggestion that the President of the United States – after the elections – personally travel to Teheran and reach out to the Iranian people. That is no more improbable than Richard Nixon’s historic visit to China. I would add the suggestion that while he is at it, the President come to Jerusalem, too, to seal the compromise.

A YEAR and a half ago, I also dared to suggest that the Arab Spring would be good for Israel.

At the time, it was a common assumption in Israel, and throughout the West, that Arab democracy would lead to a surge of political Islam, and that this would present a mortal danger to Israel. The first part of the assumption was right, the second was wrong.

The obscurantist demonization of Islam can be dangerously misleading. The painting of Islam as a murderous, inherently anti-Semitic religion, can lead to destructive consequences. For-

tunately, the dire forecasts are being disproved daily.

In the homeland of the Arab Awakening, Tunisia, a moderate Islamic regime has taken root. In Libya, where commentators foresaw chaos and permanent civil war between the tribes, chances for stability are growing. So are the chances that Islamists will play a positive role in post-Assad Syria.

And most importantly – the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt is behaving with exemplary caution. Six thousand years of Egyptian wisdom is having a moderating effect on the Brothers, including Brother Morsi. In the few weeks of his rule, he has already demonstrated a remarkable ability for compromising with divergent interests – with the secular liberals and the army command in his own country, with the US, even with Israel. He is now engaged in an effort to settle things with the Sinai Bedouins, addressing their (justified) grievances and calling a halt to military action.

It is, of course, much too early to tell, but I believe that a rejuvenated Arab world, in which moderate Islamic forces play an important role (as they do in Turkey), may form the environment for Israeli-Arab peace. If we desire peace.

For this to happen, we must break out of Netanyahu’s imaginary world and return to the real world, the exciting, changing, challenging world of the 21st century.

Otherwise we will just add another sad chapter to the late Barbara Tuchman’s brilliant book, *The March of Folly*.