

The Return of the Generals

Uri Avnery

August 20, 2011

SINCE THE beginning of the conflict, the extremists of both sides have always played into each other's hands. The cooperation between them was always much more effective than the ties between the corresponding peace activists.

"Can two walk together, except they be agreed?" asked the prophet Amos (3:3). Well, seems they can.

This was proved again this week.

AT THE beginning of the week, Binyamin Netanyahu was desperately looking for a way out of an escalating internal crisis. The social protest movement was gathering momentum and posing a growing danger to his government.

The struggle was going on, but the protest had already made a huge difference. The whole content of the public discourse had changed beyond recognition.

Social ideas were taking over, pushing aside the hackneyed talk about "security". TV talk show panels, previously full of used generals, were now packed with social workers and professors of economics. One of the consequences was that women were also much more prominent.

And then it happened. A small extremist Islamist group in the Gaza Strip sent a detachment into the Egyptian Sinai desert, from where it easily crossed the undefended Israeli border and created havoc. Several fighters (or terrorists, depends who is talking) succeeded in killing eight Israeli soldiers and civilians, before some of them were killed. Another four of their comrades were killed on the Egyptian side of the border. The aim seems to have been to capture another Israeli soldier, to strengthen the case for a prisoner exchange on their terms.

In a jiffy, the economics professors vanished from the TV screens, and their place was taken by the old gang of exes – ex-generals, ex-secret-service chiefs, ex-policemen, all male, of course, accompanied by their entourage of obsequious military correspondents and far-right politicians.

With a sigh of relief, Netanyahu returned to his usual stance. Here he was, surrounded by generals, the he-man, the resolute fighter, the Defender of Israel.

IT WAS, for him and his government, an incredible stroke of luck.

It can be compared to what happened in 1982. Ariel Sharon, then Minister of Defense, had decided to attack the Palestinians and Syrians in Lebanon. He flew to Washington to obtain the necessary American agreement. Alexander Haig told him that the US could not agree, unless there was a "credible provocation".

A few days later, the most extreme Palestinian group, led by Abu Nidal, Yasser Arafat's mortal enemy, made an attempt on the life of the Israeli ambassador in London, paralyzing him irreversibly. That was certainly a "credible provocation". Lebanon War I was on its way.

This week's attack was also an answer to a prayer. Seems

that God loves Netanyahu and the military establishment. The incident not only wiped the protest off the screen, it also put an end to any serious chance of taking billions off the huge military budget in order to strengthen the social services. On the contrary, the event proved that we need a sophisticated electronic fence along the 150 miles of our desert border with Sinai. More, not less, billions for the military.

BEFORE THIS miracle occurred, it looked as if the protest movement was unstoppable.

Whatever Netanyahu did was too little, too late, and just wrong.

In the first days, Netanyahu treated the whole thing as a childish prank, unworthy of the attention of responsible adults. When he realized that this movement was serious, he mumbled some vague proposals for lowering the price of apartments, but by then the protest had already moved far beyond the original demand for "affordable housing". The slogan was now "The People Want Social Justice"

After the huge 250,000-strong demonstration in Tel Aviv, the protest leaders were facing a dilemma: how to proceed? Yet another mass protest in Tel Aviv might mean falling attendance. The solution was sheer genius: not another big demonstration in Tel Aviv, but smaller demonstrations all over the country. This disarmed the reproach that the protesters are spoiled Tel Aviv brats, "sushi eaters and water-pipe smokers" as one minister put it. It also brought the protest to the masses of disadvantaged Oriental Jewish inhabitants of the "periphery", from Afula in the North to Beer Sheva in the South, most of them the traditional voters of Likud. It became a love-fest of fraternization.

So what does a run-of-the-mill politician do in such a situation? Well, of course, he appoints a committee. So Netanyahu told a respectable professor with a good reputation to set up a committee which would, in cooperation with nine ministers, no less, come up with a set of solutions. He even told him that he was ready to completely change his own convictions.

(He did already change one of his convictions when he announced in 2009 that he now advocates the Two-State Solution. But after that momentous about-face, absolutely nothing changed on the ground.)

The youngsters in the tents joked that "Bibi" could not change his opinions, because he has none. But that is a mistake – he does indeed have very definite opinions on both the national and the social levels: "the whole of Eretz Israel" on the one, and Reagan-Thatcher economic orthodoxy on the other.

The young tent leaders countered the appointment of the establishment committee with an unexpected move: they appointed a 60-strong advisory council of their own, composed of some of the most prominent university professors, including an Arab female professor and a moderate rabbi, and headed by a former deputy governor of the Bank of Israel.

The government committee has already made it clear that it will not deal with middle class problems but concentrate on those of the lowest socio-economic groups. Netanyahu has added that he will not automatically adopt their (future) recommendations, but weight them against the economic possibilities. In other words, he does not trust his own nominees to understand the economic facts of life.

AT THAT point, Netanyahu and his aides pinned their hopes on two dates: September and November 2011.

In November, the rainy season usually sets in. No drop of rain before that. But when it starts to rain cats and dogs, it was hoped in Netanyahu's office, the spoiled Tel Aviv kids will run for shelter. End of the Rothschild tent city.

Well, I remember spending some miserable weeks in the winter of the 1948 war in worse tents, in the midst of a sea of mud and water. I don't think that the rain will make the tent-dwellers give up their struggle, even if Netanyahu's religious partners send the most fervent Jewish prayers for rain to the high heavens.

But before that, in September, just a few weeks away, the Palestinians – it was hoped - would start a crisis that will divert attention. This week they already submitted to the UN General Assembly a request to recognize the State of Palestine. The Assembly will most probably accede. Avigdor Lieberman has already enthusiastically assured us that the Palestinians are planning a "bloodbath" at that time. Young Israelis will have to exchange their tents in Tel Aviv for the tents in the West Bank army camps.

It's a nice dream (for the Liebermans), but Palestinians had so far showed no inclination to violence.

All that changed this week.

FROM NOW on, Netanyahu and his colleagues can direct events as they wish.

They have already "liquidated" the chiefs of the group which carried out the attack, called "the Popular Resistance Committees". This happened while the fire-fight along the border was still going on. The army had been forewarned and was ready. The fact that the attackers succeeded nevertheless in crossing the border and shooting at vehicles was ascribed to an operational failure.

What now? The group in Gaza will fire rockets in retaliation. Netanyahu can – if he so wishes – kill more Palestinian leaders, military and civilian. This can easily set off a vicious circle of retaliation and counter-retaliation, leading to a full-scale Molten

Lead-style war. Thousands of rockets on Israel, thousands of bombs on the Gaza Strip. One ex-military fool already argued that the entire Gaza Strip will have to be re-occupied.

In other words, Netanyahu has his hand on the tap of violence, and he can raise or lower the flames at will.

His desire to put an end to the social protest movement may well play a role in his decisions.

THIS BRINGS us back to the big question of the protest movement: can one bring about real change, as distinct from forcing some grudging concessions from the government, without becoming a political force?

Can this movement succeed as long as there is a government which has the power to start - or deepen - a "security crisis" at any time?

And the related question: can one talk about social justice without talking about peace?

A few days ago, while strolling among the tents on Rothschild Boulevard, I was asked by an internal radio station to give an interview and address the tent-dwellers. I said: "You don't want to talk about peace, because you want to avoid being branded as 'leftists'. I respect that. But social justice and peace are two sides of the same coin, they cannot be separated. Not only because they are based on the same moral principles, but also because in practice they depend on each other."

When I said that, I could not have imagined how clearly this would be demonstrated only two days later.

REAL CHANGE means replacing this government with a new and very different political set up.

Here and there people in the tents are already talking about a new party. But elections are two years away, and for the time being there is no sign of a real crack in the right-wing coalition that might bring the elections closer. Will the protest be able to keep up its momentum for two whole years?

Israeli governments have yielded in the past to mass demonstrations and public uprisings. The formidable Golda Meir resigned in the face of mass demonstrations blaming her for the omissions that led to the fiasco at the start of the Yom Kippur War. The government coalitions of both Netanyahu and Ehud Barak in the 1990s broke under the pressure of an indignant public opinion.

Can this happen now? In view of the military flare-up this week, it does not look likely. But stranger things have happened between heaven and earth, especially in Israel, the land of limited impossibilities.