

The Sea and the River

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“PALESTINE, FROM THE JORDAN *to the Sea, belongs to us!*” declared Khaled Meshal last week at the huge victory rally in Gaza.

“*Eretz Israel, from the sea to the Jordan, belongs to us!*” declare right-wing Israelis on every occasion.

The two statements seem to be the same, with only the name of the country changed.

But if you read them again carefully, there is a slight difference. The direction.

FROM THE sea to the river, from the river to the sea.

Therein lies much more significance than meets the eye. It shows how the speaker sees himself—coming from the East or from the West.

When one says “*from the river to the sea*”, one sees oneself as belonging to the extensive region known to Westerners as the “*Middle East*”¹, a vital part of the Asian continent.

When one says “*from the sea to the river*”, one sees oneself as coming from the West and living as a bridgehead of the West, facing a foreign, and probably hostile, continent.

In its long recorded history, going back many thousands of years, this country—whether Canaan, Palestine or Eretz Israel—has seen many waves of invaders who came to settle here.

Most of these waves came from the hinterland. Canaanites, Hebrews, Arabs, and many others came from the East. They settled here, mingled with the existing population and were soon absorbed, creating new mixtures and establishing natural relations with the neighboring countries. They fought wars, made peace, prospered, suffered in times of drought.

The ancient Israelite kingdoms (not the mythical ones of Saul, David and Solomon but the real historical ones of Ahab and his successors) were a natural part of this environment, as witnessed by contemporary Assyrian and other documents.

So were the Arab invaders of the 7th century. They settled among the locals. These very slowly converted from Christianity and Judaism to Islam, adopted the Ara-

bic language and became “Arabs”, much as the Canaanites before them had become “Israelites”.

QUITE DIFFERENT was the way of those invaders who came from the West.

There were three waves: the Philistines in antiquity, the Crusaders in the Middle Ages and the Zionists in modern times.

Coming from the West (even if, like the first Crusaders, overland) the invader sees the vast enemy continent before him. He clings to the shore, establishes a bridgehead and advances to enlarge it. Significantly, no “western” invader ever established borders—they advanced or retreated as their forces and circumstances decreed.

This historical picture applies, of course, only to those invaders who came and settled in the country. It does not concern the invading empires which just wanted to control the area. They came from all directions and moved on—Hittites and Egyptians, Assyrians and Babylonians, Persians and Greeks, Romans and Byzantines, Arabs and Mongols, Turks and British.²

Eastern Empires usually continued through Egypt to the West, turning North Africa into a Semitic sphere. Western Empires continued to the East, towards India.

Tutmosis, Cyrus, Alexander, Caesar, Napoleon and many others came and passed on—but none of them left a lasting mark on the country.

LIKE THEIR predecessors coming from the West, the Zionists had a bridgehead mentality from the start, and have it to this day.

Indeed, they had it even before the Zionist movement was officially founded. In his canonical book, *Der Judenstaat*, Theodor Herzl, the visionary whose picture hangs in the Knesset plenum hall, wrote that the future Jewish State would form a part of the “*wall against Asia*”. It would serve as a “*forward position of the culture against the barbarism*”.

Not just culture, but The Culture. And not just barbarism, but The Barbarism. For a reader in the 1890s, these needed no explanation: Culture was white and European, Barbarism was everything else, whether brown, red, black

¹The term “*Middle East*” is, itself, a patronizing expression with colonial undertones—it suggests that the area has no independent standing. It exists only in relation to a far-away world center—Berlin? London? Washington?

²The Mongols came here after destroying Iraq, and were beaten decisively by the Muslim general Baybars, heir of Saladin, in one of the most decisive battles in history.

or yellow.

In today's Israel, five generations later, this mentality has not changed. Ehud Barak coined the phrase which reflects this mentality more clearly than any other: "*We are a Villa in the Jungle*".

Villa: culture, civilization, order, the West, Europe. Jungle: barbarism, the Arab/Muslim world surrounding us, a place full of wild animals, where anything can happen at any moment.

This phrase is repeated endlessly and accepted by practically everyone. Politicians and army officers may replace it with "*the neighborhood*" ("Shekhuna"). Daily examples: "*In the neighborhood in which we live, we cannot relax for a moment!*" Or: "*In a neighborhood like ours we need the atom bomb!*"

Moshe Dayan, who had a poetic streak, said two generations ago in the most important speech of his life: "*We are a generation of settlers, and without the steel helmet and the cannon we cannot plant a tree and build a house. . . This is the fate of our generation, the choice of our life—to be prepared and armed, strong and tough, or otherwise the sword will slip from our fist and our life will be snuffed out.*" In another speech, a few years later, Dayan clarified that he did not mean just one generation—but many to come, endlessly—the typical bridgehead mentality which knows no borders, neither in space nor in time.³

The difference between sea-to-river and river-to-sea is not just political, and far from superficial. It goes right to the roots of the conflict.

BACK TO Meshal. His speech was a reiteration of the most extreme Palestinian line. The same words could have been delivered seventy years ago by the then leader, Haj Amin al-Husseini, the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem. It is the line that has played into the hands of the Zionists and condemned the Palestinian people to disaster, to untold suffering and to its present situation.

Part of the blame must go to the Arabic language. It is a beautiful tongue, and can easily intoxicate its speaker. Modern Arab history is full of wonderful orators, who got so drunk on their own words that they lost contact with reality.

I remember an occasion when the Egyptian president, Gamal Abd al-Nasser, an outstanding rhetorician and the idol of the Arab masses, was making a sensible speech about Egyptian affairs, when somebody in the crowd

shouted: "*Palestine, oh Gamal!*" Nasser forgot what he was talking about and launched into a passionate exposition of the Palestinian cause, heating himself up more and more, until he was obviously in a kind of trance. It was the state of mind which led him into the Israeli trap in 1967.⁴

One could say, of course, that Meshal's speech before the masses was just a politician's bid for popularity and does not really count—what counts is the very different positions he adopted behind the scenes in Egypt and Gaza. That might sound reasonable—but is not.

First, because speeches influence the speaker. It would be very difficult for him to extract himself now from the verbal trap he set up for himself, even if Arab listeners have learned to take grandiose speeches with a grain of salt.

Second, because extreme Arab speeches immediately become ammunition in the hands of Israeli extremists. They reinforce the general contention, also from Ehud Barak, that "*we have no partner for peace*". Meshal's mirror image, Avigdor Lieberman, has already used this speech as his main weapon in repulsing the European condemnation of Netanyahu's new destructive settlement project.

IN REALITY, Meshal is now more than ever ready for compromise (as was Nasser at the time he made the speech I mentioned). He has indicated that while not ready to make peace with Israel himself, he would accept a peace agreement signed by Mahmoud Abbas and ratified in a Palestinian referendum. He also indicated that such a peace should be based on the 1967 borders. He knows, of course, that Abbas is ready for an "agreed" solution of the refugee problem—agreed, that is, by Israel. This means that only a symbolic number will be allowed to return to Israeli territory.

Trouble is, in his exciting public speech he said the very opposite, and worse. So did Nasser, and it killed him. So, for some time, did Yasser Arafat, until he saw the folly of this method. As, I think, will Khaled Meshal, in due time.

There is no escape from the simple truth that there will be two states between the river and the sea—as well as between the sea and the river.

Unless we want the whole country—sea to river, river to sea—to become one vast graveyard.

³Just a personal remark: sixty-five years ago, a year before the foundation of Israel, I published a pamphlet which opened with the words: "*When our Zionist fathers decided to set up a [national home in this country] they had the choice between two courses: They could appear [as] a bridgehead of the "white" race and the master of the "natives" [or] as the heirs of the Semitic political and cultural tradition [leading] the war of liberation of the Semitic peoples against European exploitation. . .*"

⁴Israeli politicians since Menachem Begin are, fortunately, very poor speakers, speaking very inferior Hebrew.