

The Strong and the Sweet

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IT WAS A day of joy.

Joy for the Palestinian people.

Joy for all those who hope for peace between Israel and the Arab world.

And, in a modest way, for me personally.

The General Assembly of the United Nations, the highest world forum, has voted overwhelmingly for the recognition of the State of Palestine, though in a limited way.

The resolution adopted by the same forum 65 years ago to the day, to partition historical Palestine between a Jewish and an Arab state, has at long last been reaffirmed.

I HOPE I may be excused a few moments of personal celebration.

During the war of 1948, which followed the first resolution, I came to the conclusion that there exists a Palestinian people and that the establishment of a Palestinian state, next to the new State of Israel, is the prerequisite for peace.

As a simple soldier, I fought in dozens of engagements against the Arab inhabitants of Palestine. I saw how dozens of Arab towns and villages were destroyed and left deserted. Long before I saw the first Egyptian soldier, I saw the people of Palestine (who had started the war) fight for what was their homeland.

Before the war, I hoped that the unity of the country, so dear to both peoples, could be preserved. The war convinced me that reality had smashed this dream forever.

I was still in uniform when, in early 1949, I tried to set up an initiative for what is now called the Two-State Solution. I met with two young Arabs in Haifa for this purpose. One was a Muslim Arab, the other a Druze sheik. (Both became members of the Knesset before me.)

At the time, it looked like mission impossible. "Palestine" had been wiped off the map. 78% of the country had become Israel, the other 22% divided between Jordan and Egypt. The very existence of a Palestinian people was vehemently denied by the Israeli establishment, indeed, the denial became an article of faith. Much later, Golda Meir famously declared that "*there is no such thing as a Palestinian people*". Respected charlatans wrote popular books "proving" that the Arabs in Palestine were pretenders who had only recently arrived. The Israeli leadership was convinced that the "Palestinian problem" had disappeared, once and forever.

In 1949, there were not a hundred persons in the entire world who believed in this solution. Not a single country supported it. The Arab countries still believed that Israel would just disappear. Britain supported its client state, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. The US had its own local strongmen. Stalin's Soviet Union supported Israel.

Mine was a lonely fight. For the next 40 years, as the editor of a news magazine, I brought the subject up almost every week. When I was elected to the Knesset, I did the same there.

In 1968 I went to Washington DC, in order to propagate the idea there. I was politely received by the relevant officials in the State Department (Joseph Sisco), the White House (Harold Saunders), the US mission to the UN (Charles Yost), leading Senators and Congressmen, as well as the British father of Resolution 242 (Lord Caradon). The uniform answer from all of them, without exception: a Palestinian state was out of question.

When I published a book devoted to this solution, the PLO in Beirut attacked me in 1970 in a book entitled "*Uri Avnery and Neo-Zionism*".

Today, there is a world consensus that a solution of the conflict without a Palestinian state is quite out of the question.

So why not celebrate now?

WHY NOW? WHY didn't it happen before or later?

Because of the Pillar of Cloud, the historic masterpiece from Binyamin Netanyahu, Ehud Barak and Avigdor Lieberman.

The Bible tells us about Samson the hero, who rent a lion with his bare hands. When he returned to the scene, a swarm of bees had made the carcass of the lion its home and produced honey. So Samson posed a riddle to the Philistines: "*Out of the strong came forth sweetness*". This is now a Hebrew proverb.

Well, out of the "strong" Israeli operation against Gaza, sweetness has indeed come forth. It is another confirmation of the rule that when you start a war or a revolution, you never know what will come out of it.

One of the results of the operation was that the prestige and popularity of Hamas shot sky-high, while the Palestinian Authority of Mahmoud Abbas sank to new depths. That was a result the West could not possibly tolerate. A

defeat of the “moderates” and a victory for the Islamic “extremists” were a disaster for President Barack Obama and the entire Western camp. Something had to be found—with all urgency—to provide Abbas with a resounding achievement.

Fortunately, Abbas was already on the way to obtain UN approval for the recognition of Palestine as a “state” (though not yet as a full member of the world organization). For Abbas, it was a move of despair. Suddenly, it became a beacon of victory.

THE COMPETITION between the Hamas and Fatah movements is viewed as a disaster for the Palestinian cause. But there is also another way to look at it.

Let’s go back to our own history. During the 30s and 40s, our Struggle for Liberation (as we called it) split between two camps, who hated each other with growing intensity.

On the one side was the “official” leadership, led by David Ben-Gurion, represented by the “Jewish Agency” which cooperated with the British administration. Its military arm was the Haganah, a very large, semi-official militia, mostly tolerated by the British.

On the other side was the Irgun (“*National Military Organization*”), the far more radical armed wing of the nationalist “revisionist” party of Vladimir Jabotinsky. It split and yet another, even more radical, organization was born. The British called it “*the Stern Gang*”, after its leader, Avraham Stern.

The enmity between these organizations was intense. For a time, Haganah members kidnapped Irgun fighters and turned them over to the British police, who tortured them and sent them to camps in Africa. A bloody fratricidal war was avoided only because the Irgun leader, Menachem Begin, forbade all actions of revenge. By contrast, the Stern people bluntly told the Haganah that they would shoot anyone trying to attack their members.

In retrospect, the two sides can be seen as acting as the two arms of the same body. The “terrorism” of the Irgun and Stern complemented the diplomacy of the Zionist leadership. The diplomats exploited the achievements of the fighters. In order to counterbalance the growing popularity of the “terrorists”, the British made concessions to Ben-Gurion. A friend of mine called the Irgun “*the shooting agency of the Jewish Agency*”.

In a way, this is now the situation in the Palestinian camp.

FOR YEARS, the Israeli government has threatened Abbas with the most dire consequences if he dared to go to the UN. Abolishing the Oslo agreement and destroying the Palestinian authority was the bare minimum. Lieberman called the move “diplomatic terrorism”.

And now? Nothing. Not a bang and barely a whimper. Even Netanyahu understands that the Pillar of Cloud has created a situation where world support for Abbas has become inevitable.

What to do? Nothing! Pretend the whole thing is a joke. Who cares? What is this UNO anyway? What difference does it make?

Netanyahu is more concerned about another thing that happened to him this week. In the Likud primary elections, all the “moderates” in his party were unceremoniously kicked out. No liberal, democratic alibi was left. The Likud-Beitenu faction in the next Knesset will be composed entirely of right-wing extremists, among them several outright fascists, people who want to destroy the independence of the Supreme Court, cover the West Bank densely with settlements and prevent peace and a Palestinian state by all possible means.

While Netanyahu is sure to win the coming elections and continue to serve as Prime Minister, he is too clever not to realize where he is now: a hostage to extremists, liable to be thrown out by his own Knesset faction if he so much as mentions peace, to be displaced at any time by Lieberman or worse.

ON FIRST sight, nothing much has changed. But only on first sight.

What has happened is that the foundation of the State of Palestine has now been officially acknowledged as the aim of the world community. The “Two-State solution” is now the only solution on the table. The “One-State solution”, if it ever lived, is as dead as the dodo.

Of course, the apartheid one-state is reality. If nothing changes on the ground, it will become deeper and stronger. Almost every day brings news of it becoming more and more entrenched.¹

But the quest for peace based on the co-existence between Israel and Palestine has taken a big step forwards. Unity between the Palestinians should be the next. US support for the actual creation of the State of Palestine should come soon after.

The strong must lead to the sweet.

¹The bus monopoly has just announced that from now on there will be separate buses for West Bank Palestinians in Israel.