

# The Watch on the Jordan

Uri Avnery

July 5, 2014

**T**HE ARAB WORLD is in turmoil. Syria and Iraq are breaking apart, the thousand-year old conflict between Muslim Sunnis and Muslim Shiites is reaching a new climax. A historic drama is unfolding around us.

And what is the reaction of our government?

Binyamin Netanyahu put it succinctly: “*We must defend Israel on the Jordan River, before they reach Tel Aviv.*”

Simple, concise, idiotic.

DEFEND ISRAEL against whom? Against ISIS, of course.

ISIS is the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham—a new force in the Arab world. Sham is Greater Syria—the traditional Arab name for the territory that comprises the present countries of Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine and Israel. Together with Iraq, it forms what historians call the Fertile Crescent, the green region around the top of the desolate Arab desert.

For most of history, the Fertile Crescent was one country, part of successive empires. Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, Ottomans and many others kept them united, until two foreign gentlemen, Sir Mark Sykes and M. Francois Georges- Picot, set about cutting them up according to their own imperial interests. This happened during World War I, which was set in motion by an assassination that happened 100 years ago last week.

With sublime disregard for the peoples, ethnic origins and religious identities, Sykes and Picot created national states where no nations existed. They and their successors, notably Gertrude Bell, T.E. Lawrence and Winston Churchill, put together three quite different communities and created “Iraq”, importing a foreign king from Mecca.

“Syria” was allotted to the French. An imperial commissioner took a map and a pencil and drew a border in the middle of the desert between Damascus and Baghdad. The French then cut Syria up into several small statelets for the Sunnis, Alawites, Druze, Maronites etc.. Later they created Greater Lebanon, where they set up a system that installed Maronite Christians on top of the despised Shiites.

The Kurds, a real nation, were cut up into four parts, each of which was allotted to a different country. In Pales-

tine, a Zionist “national home” was planned in the middle of a hostile Arab population. The country beyond the Jordan was cut off to provide a principality for another Emir from Mecca.

This is the world in which we grew up, and which is crumbling now.

WHAT ISIS is trying to do now is simply to eradicate all these borders. In the process, they are laying bare the basic Sunni-Shiite divide. They want to create a unified Sunni-Muslim Caliphate.

They are up against huge entrenched interests, and will probably fail. But they are sowing something much more lasting: an idea that may take hold in the minds of many millions. It may come to fruition in 25, 50 or a hundred years. It may be the wave of the future.

Seeing this picture developing, what should we do?

For me, the answer is quite clear: make peace, quickly, as long as the Arab world is as it is now.

“Peace” means not only peace with the Palestinian people, but with the entire Arab world. The Arab peace initiative—based on the initiative of the Saudi (then) Crown Prince—is still lying on the table. It offers full and unconditional peace with the State of Israel in return for the end of the occupation and the creation of the independent State of Palestine. Hamas has officially agreed to this, provided it is ratified by a Palestinian plebiscite.

It will not be easy. A lot of obstacles will have to be overcome. But it is possible. And it is sheer lunacy not to try.

NOW!

THE RESPONSE of our leadership is the exact opposite.

The historic events and their background interest them “like the skin of the garlic”, as we say in Hebrew.

Their interest is totally focused on the effort to keep hold of the West Bank, which means to prevent the creation of a Palestinian state. Which means to prevent peace.

The surest way to do so is to hold on to the Jordan valley. No Palestinian negotiator will ever agree to the loss of the Jordan valley – either by direct annexation to Israel or by the “temporary” stationing of Israeli troops in the valley for any length of time.

This would mean not only the loss of 25% of the West

Bank (which altogether constitutes 22% of historical Palestine) and its most fertile part but also the cutting-off of the putative Palestinian state from the rest of the world. The State of Palestine would become an enclave within Israel, surrounded on all sides by Israeli-held territory. Much like the South African Bantustans.

When Ehud Barak proposed this at the Camp David conference, the negotiations broke down. The most Palestinians could agree to was the temporary stationing of UN or American troops there.

This week, suddenly, the Jordan Valley demand popped up again. The picture was simple. ISIS is storming south from its Syrian-Iraqi base. It will overrun all of Iraq. From there, it will invade Jordan and pop up on the other side of the Jordan river.

As Netanyahu said: if they are not stopped by the permanent Israeli garrison there, they will appear at the gates of Tel Aviv (except that Tel Aviv has no gates).

Logical? Self-evident? Inescapable? Utter nonsense!

Militarily, ISIS is a negligible force. It has no air force, tanks or artillery. They are opposed by Iran and the US. Compared to them, even the Iraqi army is still a potent force. Next, the Jordanian army is far from a pushover.

Moreover, if ISIS came even near to threatening the Jordanian kingdom, the Israeli army would not wait for them on the Jordan River. They would be requested by the Jordanians to come to the rescue—as happened during the Black September of 1970, when Golda Meir, acting under the orders of Henry Kissinger, warned an approaching Syrian army column that Israel would invade to forestall them. That was enough.

The very idea of Israeli soldiers manning the ramparts in the Jordan valley to defend Israel from ISIS (or anyone else) is sheer idiocy. Even more idiotic than the famous Bar Lev line, which was supposed to stop the Egyptians along the Suez Canal in 1973. It fell within hours. Yet

the Bar Lev “line” – reminiscent of the (futile) French Maginot Line and the (futile) German Siegfried Line of World War II—was far away from the center of Israel.

The Israel army has missiles, drones and other weapons that would stop an enemy in his tracks long, long before he could possibly reach the Jordan. The bulk of the Israeli army could move from the sea shore and cross the river within a few hours.

This whole way of thinking shows that our Right politicians—like most of their persuasion around the world, I suspect—still live in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. If I were in a less charitable mood, I would say in the Middle Ages. They might as well be equipped with bows and arrows.<sup>1</sup>

BACK TO the future.

The Crusaders established their kingdom in Palestine when the Arab world was splintered. Their great adversary, the Kurd Salah-al-Din al-Ayubi (Saladin), devoted decades to unifying the Arab world around them before vanquishing them on the battlefield of Hittin.

Today, the Arab world seems more splintered than ever. But a new Arab world is taking shape, the contours of which can be conceived only dimly.

Our place is within the new reality, not outside, looking on.

Alas, our leaders are quite unable to see that. They are still living in the world of Sykes and Picot, a world of foreign potentates (now American). For them, the turmoil around us is—well, just turmoil.

The founder of modern Zionism wrote 118 years ago that we shall serve in Palestine as pioneers of European culture and constitute “a wall against Asiatic barbarism.”

Our leaders still live in this imagined reality, rephrased as “a villa in the jungle”.

So what to do when the predators in the jungle are approaching and roaring? Build higher walls, of course.

What else?

---

<sup>1</sup>The whole thing reminds me, somehow, of a 19<sup>th</sup> century German army song: “To the Rhine! To the Rhine! To the German Rhine! / Who wants to be the watchman of the River! / Dear Fatherland, don’t worry / Steady and true stands the watch on the Rhine! / The German youngster, pious and strong / Protects the German borderland!”