

# (Un)holy River

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**S**O HERE COMES JOHN KERRY AGAIN, for the umpteenth time (but who is counting?) to make peace between us and the Palestinians.

It is a highly laudable effort. Unfortunately, it is based on a false premise. To wit: that the Israeli government wants peace based on the two-state solution.

Unwilling—or unable—to recognize this simple truth, Kerry looks for a way around. He tries approaches from different directions, in the hope of convincing Binyamin Netanyahu. In his imagination he hears Netanyahu exclaim: “*Now, why didn’t I think of that?!*”

So here he comes with a new idea: to start by solving Israel’s security problems and doing away with its worries.

Let’s not talk for now about the other “core problems”, he says. Let’s look at your concerns and see how to meet them. I have brought with me an honest-to-goodness combat general with an honest-to-goodness security plan. Have a look at it!

This approach is based on the false premise—the offspring of the overall premise—that the “security concerns” cited by our government are genuine. Kerry is expressing the basic American belief that if reasonable people sit around a table and analyze a problem, they will find a solution.

So there is a plan. General John Allen, a former commander of the war in Afghanistan, puts it on the table and explains its merits. It addresses many worries. The main subject is the insistence of the Israeli army that whatever the borders of the future State of Palestine, Israel must continue for a long, long time to control the Jordan valley.

Since the Jordan valley constitutes about 20% of the West Bank, which together with the Gaza Strip constitutes altogether about 22% of the former country of Palestine, this is a non-starter.

For our government, that is its main value.

THE JORDAN, one of the most celebrated rivers in world history, is actually a smallish creek about 250 km long and a few dozen meters wide. Its sources are on the Syrian highlands (a.k.a. the Golan Heights) and it ends ingloriously in the Dead Sea, which is actually an inland lake. Not much of a river.

How did it attain its present strategic importance?

The following account is simplified, but not far re-

moved from what actually happened.

Immediately after the June 1967 war, when all the Palestinian lands had fallen into Israel’s hands, groups of agricultural experts swarmed over the West Bank to see what could be exploited.

Most of the West Bank consists of stony hills, very picturesque but hardly suited to modern agricultural methods. Every inch of arable land was used by the Palestinian villages, using terraces and other ancient methods. No good for new kibbutzim. Except the Jordan valley.

This valley, part of the huge Syrian-African rift, is flat. Lodged between the river and the central Palestinian mountain ridge, it also has ample water. For the trained eye of a kibbutznik, it was ideal for agricultural machinery. It was also sparsely populated.

Almost all important Israeli leaders at the time had an agricultural background. Levy Eshkol, the Prime Minister, had been responsible for many years, before the establishment of the state, for the Jewish settlement effort. The Minister of Defense, Moshe Dayan, was born in a kibbutz and grew up in a Moshav (cooperative village). The Minister of Labor, Yigal Allon, was not only a renowned general of the 1948 war but also a leader of the largest kibbutz movement. His mentor was Israel Galili, another kibbutz leader, the *éminence grise* of Golda Meir.

IT WAS Allon who provided the military pretext for keeping possession of the Jordan valley.

He devised a security plan for the post-1967 Israel. Its central plank was the annexation of the valley.

Known as the “Allon Plan”, it had—and still has—a strong hold on Israeli political thinking. It was never officially adopted by the Israeli government. Nor does there exist an authorized map of the plan. But it has been endlessly discussed.

The Allon Plan provides for the annexation of the entire Jordan valley, the shore of the Dead Sea and the Gaza Strip. In order not to cut off the rest of the West Bank from the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan (also named for the river), the Plan left open a corridor between the two territories, near Jericho.

It was generally assumed that Allon intended to return the West Bank to the kingdom. But he did not really care. When I accused him from the Knesset rostrum of foiling

the establishment of a Palestinian state, he sent me a note saying: *“I am ready for a Palestinian state in the West Bank. So why am I less of a dove than you?”*

THE MILITARY foundations of the Allon Plan were not entirely ridiculous—at the time.

One must remember the situation in, say, 1968. The Kingdom of Jordan was officially an “enemy country”, though there was always a secret alliance with its kings. Iraq was a strong state, and its army was highly respected by our military. Syria had been beaten in the 1967 war, but their army was still intact. Saudi Arabia, with its enormous wealth, stood behind them. (Who could have even imagined that the Saudis would some day become our allies against Iran?)

The Israeli military nightmare was that all these military forces would suddenly come together on Jordanian soil and attack Israel, cross the river, unite with the West Bank Palestinians and invade Israel proper. At a certain point, between the West Bank town of Tulkarm and the Mediterranean Sea, Israel is only 14 (fourteen) kilometers wide.

That was 55 years ago. Today this picture is indeed ridiculous. The only possible military threat facing Israel comes from Iran, and it does not include an attack by massed troops on land. If Iranian missiles come flying towards us, Israeli troops on the Jordan river will be mere onlookers. They will have nothing to look at. The challenge will be met long before the missiles come near.

As for warning stations, they can be located in my apartment in Tel Aviv. The 100 or so kilometers from here to the Jordan will make no difference.

The same goes for other “security concerns”, such as keeping warning stations in the West Bank.

The American general will listen politely and be hard put not to burst out laughing.

TODAY, THE Jordan valley is practically Arab-free. From time to time the few remaining Palestinians are mistreated by the army, in order to convince them to go away.

There are several Jewish settlements along the valley, put there by the Labor Party when it was still in power. The inhabitants don’t employ labor from the neighboring Palestinian villages, but cheaper and more efficient workers from Thailand. The very hot climate—the entire valley lies below sea level—allows for the growing of tropical fruit.

The only remaining Palestinian township is Jericho,

a green oasis, the lowest town on earth. The Palestinian chief negotiator, Sa’eb Erekat, lives there (though in 1948 his father was the leader of the Palestinian fighters of Abu Dis, now a suburb in annexed East Jerusalem). Sometimes the participants in Kerry’s “peace negotiations” meet there. Erekat, a nice person I used to meet at demonstrations, is in a state of resignation—in both senses.

ASSUMING FOR a moment that the general convinces Netanyahu that his security plan is wonderful and solves all our military problems, what difference would it make?

None whatsoever.

Instead, other “concerns” would come to the fore. There is an inexhaustible supply.

The same goes for the other story that fills Israel’s newspapers and TV programs these days: the expulsion of the Bedouins in the Negev.

The Bedouins have inhabited that Sinai-Negev desert since times immemorial. Ancient Egyptian stone paintings show their characteristic beards (the same beard I brought home from the 1948 war, after fighting in the Negev).

During the first years of Israel, entire Bedouin tribes were displaced and expelled. The pretexts sound eerily familiar: to forestall an Egyptian attack from the south.

The real reason was, of course, to get them off their land and replace them with Jewish settlers. US history buffs will be reminded of the treatment of the native Americans. The Army (our army) conducted several major operations, but the Bedouins are multiplying at a ferocious rate, and now they are back up to a quarter of a million.

Being Bedouins, they live dispersed with their goats over large areas. The government is trying (again) to get them out. The bureaucrats want to “Judaize” the Negev (while trying at the same time to “Judaize” the Galilee). But they are also inimical to the idea that such a relatively small number of people is occupying such large tracts of land, even barren land.

Planners in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv are drawing up all kinds of schemes to concentrate the Bedouins in townships, contrary to their traditional way of life. On paper, the plans look reasonable. In reality, they are designed to achieve the same as the plans for the Jordan valley: take land away from the Arabs and turn it over to Jewish settlers.

Call it Zionist, nationalist or racist, it is hardly an attitude conducive to peace. That should be the real concern of John Kerry and John Allen.