

# Divide et Impera

Uri Avnery

August 8, 2015

**B**INYAMIN NETANYAHU IS not known as a classical scholar, but even so he has adopted the Roman maxim *Divide et Impera*, divide and rule.

The main (and perhaps only) goal of his policy is to extend the rule of Israel, as the “Nation-State of the Jewish People”, over all of Eretz Israel, the historical land of Palestine. This means ruling all of the West Bank and covering it with Jewish settlements, while denying any civil rights to its 2.5 million plus Arab inhabitants.

East Jerusalem, with its 300,000 Arab inhabitants, has already been formally annexed to Israel, without granting them Israeli citizenship or the right to take part in Knesset elections.

That leaves the Gaza Strip, a tiny enclave with 1.8 million plus Arab inhabitants, most of them descendants of refugees from Israel. The last thing in the world Netanyahu wants is to include these, too, in the Israeli imperium.

There is a historical precedent. After the 1956 Sinai War, when President Eisenhower demanded that Israel immediately return all the Egyptian territory it had conquered, many voices in Israel called for the annexation of the Gaza Strip to Israel. David Ben-Gurion adamantly refused. He did not want hundreds of thousands more Arabs in Israel. So he gave the strip too back to Egypt.

The annexation of Gaza, while keeping the West Bank, would create an Arab majority in the Jewish State. True, a small majority, but a rapidly growing one.

THE INHABITANTS of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip belong to the same Palestinian people. They are closely connected by national identity and family ties. But they are now separate entities, geographically divided by Israeli territory, which at its narrowest point is about 30 miles broad.

Both territories were occupied by Israel in the 1967 Six-day War. But for many years, Palestinians could move freely from one to the other. Palestinians from Gaza could study in the university of Bir Zeit in the West Bank, a woman from Ramallah in the West Bank could marry a man from Beth Hanun in the Gaza strip.

Ironically, this freedom of movement came to an end with the 1994 Oslo “peace” agreement, in which Israel explicitly recognized the West Bank and the Gaza Strip as

one single territory, and undertook to open four “free passages” between them. Not a single one was ever opened.

The West Bank is now nominally administered by the Palestinian Authority, also created by the Oslo agreement, which is recognized by the UN and the majority of the world's nations as the State of Palestine under Israeli military occupation. Its leader, Mahmoud Abbas, a close colleague of the late Yasser Arafat, is committed to the Arab Peace plan, initiated by Saudi Arabia, which recognizes the State of Israel in its pre-1967 borders. No one doubts that he desires peace, based on the Two-State Solution.

IN 1996, GENERAL elections in both territories were won by Hamas (Arab initials of “Movement of Islamic Resistance”). Under Israeli pressure, the results were annulled. Whereupon Hamas took control of the Gaza Strip. That's where we are now: two separate Palestinian entities, whose rulers hate each other.

Superficial logic would dictate that the Israeli government support Mahmoud Abbas, who is committed to peace, and help him against Hamas, which at least officially is committed to the destruction of Israel. Well, it ain't necessarily so.

True, Israel has fought several wars against the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip, but it has made no effort to occupy it again, after withdrawing from it in 2005. Netanyahu, like Ben-Gurion before him, does not want to have all those Arabs. He contents himself with a blockade that turns it into “the world's largest open-air prison”.

Yet, a year after the last Israel-Gaza war, the region is rife with rumors about indirect negotiations going on in secret between Israel and Gaza about a long-range armistice (“hudna” in Arabic), even bordering on unofficial peace.

How come? Peace with the radical enemy regime in Gaza, while opposing the peace-oriented Palestinian Authority in the West Bank?

Sounds crazy, but actually isn't. For Netanyahu, Mahmoud Abbas is the greater enemy. He attracts international sympathy, the UN and most of the world's governments recognize his State of Palestine, he may well be on the way to establish a real independent Palestinian state, including Gaza.

No such danger emanates from the Hamas mini-state

in Gaza. It is detested throughout the world, even by most of the Arab states, as a "terrorist" mini-state.

SIMPLE PRAGMATIC logic would push Israel towards Hamas. The tiny enclave does not present a real danger to the mighty Israeli military machine, at most a small irritation that can be dealt with by a small military operation every few years, as happened during the last few years.

It would be logical for Netanyahu to make unofficial peace with the regime in Gaza and continue the fight against the regime in Ramallah. Why maintain the naval blockade on the Gaza strip? Why not do the opposite? Let the Gazans build a deep-sea harbor, and rebuild their beautiful international airport (which was destroyed by Israel)? It would be easy to put in place an inspection regime to prevent the smuggling in of arms.

Once there was talk of Gaza turning into an Arab Singapore. That is a wild exaggeration, but the Gaza Strip may well become a rich oasis of trade, a harbor of entry for the West Bank, Jordan and beyond.

This would dwarf the PLO regime in the West Bank, deprive it of its international standing and avert the danger of peace. The annexation of the West Bank—now called "Judea and Samaria" even by Israeli leftists—could proceed step by step, first unofficially, then officially. Jewish settlements would cover the land more and more, and in the end nothing else would remain there except some small Palestinian enclaves. Palestinians would be encouraged to leave.

FORTUNATELY (for the Palestinians) such logical thinking is alien to Netanyahu and his cohorts. Faced with two alternatives to choose from, he chooses neither.

While seeking an unofficial hudna with Hamas in Gaza, he keeps up the total blockade of the Gaza Strip. At the same time, he tightens the oppression in the West Bank, where the occupation army now routinely kills some six Palestinians per week.

Behind this non-logic there lurks a dream: the dream that in the end all the Arabs would leave Palestine and just leave us alone.

Was this the hidden hope of Zionism from the beginning? Judging from its literature, the answer is no. In his

futuristic novel, "Altneuland", Theodor Herzl describes a Jewish commonwealth in which Arabs live happily as equal citizens. The young Ben-Gurion tried to prove that the Palestinian Arabs are really Jews who at some time had no choice but to adopt Islam. Vladimir Jabotinsky, the most extremist Zionist and forefather of today's Likud, wrote a poem in which he foresaw a Jewish state where "The son of Arabia, the son of Nazareth and my son / will flourish together in abundance and happiness".

Yet many people believe that these were empty words, attuned to the realities of their time, but that underneath it all was the basic will to turn all of Palestine into an exclusively Jewish state. This desire, they believe, has unconsciously directed all Zionist action from then to now.

However, this situation did not result from any diabolical Israeli plan. Israelis don't plan things, they just push them along.

By splitting into two mutually hating entities, the Palestinian people actually collaborate with this Zionist dream. Instead of uniting against a vastly superior occupier, they undermine each other. In both mini-capitals, Ramallah and Gaza, there rules now a local ruling class, which has a vested interest in sabotaging national unity.

Instead of uniting against Israel, they hate and fight each other. Cutting the small Palestinian nation into two even smaller, mutually hostile entities, both helpless against Israel, is an act of political suicide.

ON THE face of it, the right-wing Israeli dream has won. The Palestinian people, torn apart and rent by mutual hatreds, are far removed from an effectual struggle for freedom and independence. But this is a temporary situation.

In the end, this situation will explode. The Palestine population, growing day by day (or night by night) will come together again and restart the struggle for liberation. Like every other people on earth, they will fight for their freedom.

Therefore, the "*divide et impera*" principle can turn into a catastrophe. The real long-term interest of Israel is to make peace with the entire Palestinian people, living peacefully in a state of their own, in close cooperation with Israel.