

Splendid Isolation

Uri Avnery

December 20, 2015

ALMOST A THOUSAND Israeli personalities have already signed an appeal to European parliaments for their governments to recognize the State of Palestine.

I am honored to be among the signatories, which include former ministers and members of the Knesset, diplomats and generals, artists and businessmen, writers and poets, including Israel's three outstanding writers Amos Oz, David Grossman and A. B. Yehoshua.

We believe that the independence of the Palestinian people in a state of their own, next to the State of Israel, is the basis for peace, and therefore as important for Israelis as it is for Palestinians. This, by the way, has been my firm conviction ever since the 1948 war.

The extreme right wing, which has ruled Israel in recent years, holds the opposite belief. Since it wants to turn the entire area between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River into the "nation-state of the Jewish people", it totally rejects the setting up of a Palestinian state.

These, then, are the battle lines:

A Palestinian state in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, with East Jerusalem as its capital, an Israeli-Palestinian peace treaty, the end of the occupation, peace between Israel and the entire Arab and Muslim world, or a Greater Israel, continuous occupation or annexation, more settlements and ethnic cleansing, permanent war.

Israel has to choose.

So has the world.

LATELY, SEVERAL European parliaments have called upon their governments to recognize the State of Palestine. We want to encourage that process.

The Portuguese parliament did so last Friday, following the parliaments of the UK, Ireland, France and Spain. The European parliament, an institution with growing influence and power, has done so, too.

These are only recommendations. But the government of Sweden has officially recognized the State of Palestine. Some misguided spirits have stated that this was the first recognition of Palestine by a European Union country. That is quite wrong: Palestine has already been recognized by the EU countries of Bulgaria, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Malta, Poland, Romania and Slovakia,

as well as the European non-EU states of Albania, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Georgia, Iceland, Montenegro, Russia, Serbia, Turkey and Ukraine.

Quite an impressive list. But is it important?

THE AMERICAN Declaration of Independence stresses the importance of a "decent respect for the opinion of mankind".

The Israeli declaration of independence does not include this phrase, but its whole composition shows that it is an attempt to explain its aims to the world and attain world-wide diplomatic recognition.

However, David Ben Gurion, who read the declaration aloud at the founding meeting, soon after announced his doctrine: "It is not important what the Goyim say, the important thing is what the Jews do!"

Is this really true? Doesn't the opinion of mankind count?

It was perhaps true 150 years ago, when Benjamin Disraeli proclaimed the British policy of "Splendid Isolation". I doubt it. Even then, Great Britain was deeply involved in European and world affairs.

Since then, the world has changed profoundly. Governments have become much more democratic, mass education has broadened the basis of public opinion, undreamt of means of mass communication have promoted transparency, some speak of the "world village".

Public opinion has a huge impact on politicians in democratic countries, and even in dictatorships. Where public opinion leads, governments sooner or later follow. Public sentiments become governing policy. This has diplomatic, economic and even military consequences.

THE UNITED NATIONS is the chosen vessel for voicing the "opinion of mankind".

After its founding, Israel fought a hard battle for acceptance in the world organization. The declaration of independence, which promised democracy and equality for all inhabitants, played an important role in this struggle.

Yet Ben Gurion used to call the UN "Um-Shmum"¹.

For more than 40 years now, this contempt has never been shaken. Israeli leaders relied on the US to block each and every Security Council resolution that the Israeli government disapproved of, irrespective of its content. If the

¹UM is the Hebrew acronym of the United Nations, adding the letters "Shm" is the Yiddish way of expressing contempt.

UN had been asked to reaffirm the Ten Commandments contrary to Israeli wishes, the US would have vetoed them.

Now, for the first time in UN history, this sword of Damocles may disappear. The US has hinted that it may not veto a Security Council draft resolution that the Israeli government strenuously objects to.

Incredible! No US veto? It's like saying that the sun may not rise tomorrow.

HOW COME? What has happened?

The simplest answer is that Barack Obama, like so many others, is fed up with Binyamin Netanyahu. Our prime minister has burned one bridge too many.

He has humiliated the US president time and again. He has let loose the hounds of AIPAC against him. And he has done the worst he can do to a politician: he has openly supported his opponents in the last two election campaigns.

The Prime Minister's support of Mitt Romney was nothing short of scandalous. Netanyahu, following the orders of his owner, the primitive but enormously powerful casino mogul Sheldon Adelson, campaigned for Romney openly and unabashedly. In return, Adelson created and finances the Yisrael Hayom ("Israel Today") newspaper, which, being distributed gratis, now has the widest circulation in the country. Its sole editorial policy is to support Netanyahu through thick and thin.

In the recent US mid-term elections, AIPAC assisted the Republicans again, helping them to turn the Senate into an anti-Obama bastion.

Obama has kept quiet. But he would be superhuman if he didn't plot his revenge. He has done so by secretly encouraging the Europeans to go on with their pro-Palestinian efforts. Now he has come out into the open. The US has announced that it is considering not to use its veto.

At stake is a Palestinian draft that would have the Security Council set a one-year time limit for achieving a peace agreement and a three-year limit for the end of the occupation and the creation of a Palestinian State along the 1967 borders. For right-wing Israelis, that comes near to the end of the world.

At stake is also a French draft, which does not go so far but also sets a two-year time limit to peace negotiations.

These drafts would have been unthinkable just a year ago. They show Israel's deepening isolation.

NO POLITICIAN likes radical breaks. After 41 years of an unbroken record of American use of the veto on behalf of Israel (and almost nobody else), not vetoing would be a revolutionary step. It may have a profound impact on US domestic politics, including the next presidential elections. It may hurt Hillary Clinton's chances (perhaps an additional temptation for Obama.)

Also, important US strategic interests are involved. The Arab world may be in chaos, but it still unanimously supports the Palestinian cause diplomatically. America is

relying on Arab participation in the coalition that is fighting against the Islamic State (ex-ISIS). An anti-Palestinian veto at this juncture would hurt all Arab governments who are inclined to join. Jordan, for example. Saudi Arabia. Egypt.

John Kerry, poor John Kerry, is rushing around meeting with "everybody and his wife" (as we say in chauvinist Hebrew slang) to find a solution. He is threatening Mahmoud Abbas with cutting off his funds. But Abbas rightly tells him that he has nothing to lose—if he cannot show some achievements very soon, the West Bank may well explode and the Palestinian Authority disintegrate.

In desperation, Netanyahu went to Rome to meet Kerry personally and had a stormy session with him. It seems that Kerry didn't promise anything. Sa'eb Erekat had an even stormier session with Kerry, with shouting, table banging and all.

Ex-president Shimon Peres, out of office but still an inveterate spit-licker, went to help Netanyahu with the French. He appealed to the (converted Jewish) Foreign minister, Laurent Fabius, and pleaded with him not to hurt Netanyahu on the eve of elections.

Tzipi Livni, forgetting that she was dismissed from the government and is now a leader of the opposition, phoned Kerry to support Netanyahu.

Kerry took up the idea. He asked everybody to do everything to postpone the matter until after the Israeli elections.

Interfering in another country's internal elections? God forbid! Who would dream of such a dastardly thing!?

YET WHATEVER the US does or does not do is interfering in our elections.

If it uses its veto, that is direct and blatant support of the extreme right-wing in Israel. It would show that Netanyahu was right all along, that America is in our pocket, that Israel's isolation is a myth, that we can go on doing what we are doing, occupation, settlement and all.

If the US does not use its veto and a pro-Palestinian, pro-peace resolution is adopted, it would prove that the left-wing is right in asserting that the "opinion of mankind" does count, that the not-so-splendid isolation of Israel is growing to dangerous proportions, that a change of government and policy is urgently needed.

This week, Obama threw an international bomb: after 56 years of burning enmity between the US and Cuba, he announced the resumption of diplomatic relations. This shows that he has decided to use the two years left to him in power, without the possibility of being re-elected, in order to do what he really wanted to so all the time, but was afraid to do. He can spite the Congress and do what his soul desires.

He can decide to act now decisively to achieve Israeli-Palestinian peace.

Let's hope he does.