

Just a Trick

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ONCE I HEARD THE FOLLOWING story from the then Swedish ambassador in Paris:

"In 1947, when the UN was discussing the plan to partition Palestine, I was a member of the sub-committee dealing with Jerusalem. One day, the Jews sent a new representative. His name was Abba Eban. He spoke beautiful English, much better than the British or US members of the committee. He talked for about half an hour, and at the end there was not one person in the room who did not hate his guts."

I was reminded of this episode when I saw on TV the press conference held by Dore Gold, the Director General of our Foreign Office. Its subject was the recent Paris peace conference, which was vehemently denounced by our government.

From the moment I saw Gold for the first time I disliked him. He was our new ambassador to the UN. I told myself that my attitude was an unworthy rejection of foreign Jews ("Exile Jews" in Israeli slang). Gold speaks Hebrew with a very pronounced American accent and is no Apollo. I would have preferred as our representative an erect, Israeli-looking pioneer-type who speaks English with a pronounced Hebrew accent.¹

GOLD'S CONFERENCE was about the French peace initiative concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

I have a lurking suspicion—it is still lurking around—that this is not really a French initiative, but a camouflaged American one.

It arouses the fury of the Israeli government, and no American president can do that if he wants—himself or his party—to be reelected.

There is a terrible fear haunting our government. Barack Obama abhors Netanyahu, and for good reason. But he cannot do anything against him openly—not until midnight on election day. Whether Hillary Clinton or (God forbid) Donald Trump is elected, Obama remains in office for almost another three months after the elections—and in this period he is as free as a bird (as the Germans would say). He can do whatever he likes. Whatever he dreamed about, day and night, for eight long years. And what he dreamed about was Binyamin Netanyahu.

Ah, the sweet revenge. But only in November. Until then he has to dance to Netanyahu's tune, unless he wants to hurt the Democratic nominee.

So what can he do in June? He can farm things out. For example, ask the French to convene a peace conference to prepare the way for recognition of the State of Palestine.

Asking the French to convene a high-ranking conference in Paris is like asking the cat if it wants some milk. You don't have to wait for an answer.

France, like Great Britain, is mourning its imperial past, when Paris was the center of the world and educated Germans and Russians, not to mention Egyptians and Vietnamese, spoke

French. The passports of many nations were printed in that language.

That was the time when almost half the world appeared on the maps in French blue, while the other half appeared in British red. The time when the French diplomat Georges Picot and his British colleague Mark Sykes divided between them the Ottoman Middle East, exactly a hundred years ago this week.

Having the foreign ministers (not to mention kings and presidents) of the world congregate in one of the many beautiful palaces of Paris is a French dream. The British, in much the same situation, would like the same, but are busy with the infantile urge to leave the European Union.

Whatever, what we have now is this French initiative, a glittering assembly of foreign ministers or their representatives, demanding the resumption of the peace negotiations within a limited time frame, with the declared aim of recognizing the Palestinian state.

NETANYAHU loves France. He loves to amuse himself with his wife on the French Riviera, dine in the most expensive Paris restaurants and live in the most luxurious Paris apartments—as long as others pay for it. This came out last week in the trial of a French Jew who is accused of swindles amounting to hundreds of millions of Euros, and who paid for several of the Netanyahu's trips. Netanyahu does not believe in paying for his pleasures himself, and like the Queen possesses no credit card.

But enjoying French luxury is one thing, enjoying French diplomacy is something else. At this moment Netanyahu, when he is not occupied with his lawyers, devotes his time to defeating the French initiative.

Why, for god's sake? What's so bad about a gathering of the world's top statesmen and stateswomen to re-start the Israeli-Palestinian peace process? Well, practically everything!

This peace process is like a sleeping dog. A dangerous dog. While it sleeps, Netanyahu can get away with everything—deepening the occupation of the Palestinian territories, expanding the settlements (quietly, quietly, don't wake the dog!), do all the hundred daily things that make the occupation "irreversible". And here come the French and poke the dog in the ribs.

So what? people might ask. There have been conferences before, peace processes galore, international resolutions. If another large conference is convened and the details of a peace agreement discussed, Israel will not attend and Netanyahu will ignore the whole thing. How many times has this happened before? It will hardly deserve a yawn.

BUT THIS time it may be different. Not in itself, but because of the international atmosphere.

Slowly, very slowly, Israel's international horizon is darkening. Small things are happening every day all around the world.

¹I know this sounds racist, and am thoroughly ashamed of myself.

A resolution here, a boycott there, a condemnation, a demonstration. The Israel that was universally admired disappeared long ago.

The BDS movement is immensely successful. It does not really hurt the Israeli economy. But it creates a mood, first on the campuses and then around them. Jewish institutions are sending SOS messages.

By now, the Jewish institutions themselves have been infected. The daily news about the happenings in the occupied territories and even in Israel proper hurt Jews, and especially the young ones. Many of them turn their backs on Israel, some become actively engaged against it.

Israel is a strong country. It has a very large military, the most modern weapons, a sound economy (especially high-tech), frequent diplomatic successes.

This is no second South Africa, as the BDS people would like to see it. There are huge differences. The apartheid regime was led by Nazi-sympathizers, while Israel is still riding the world-wide wave of Holocaust-era penitence and remorse. South Africa depended on its rebellious black labor force, Israel imports foreign labor from many countries.

Israel does not really depend on American financial aid. This aid is a luxury, not more. It needs the US veto against hostile proposals in the UN, but it can—and does—generally ignore the UN.

Yet, taken all in all, Israel's worsening international standing is worrying. Even Netanyahu is worried. Slowly but surely the world is accepting the State of Palestine as a fact of life and as a condition for peace.

So Netanyahu is looking around for a new trick. And what does he see? Egypt!

ISRAEL'S RELATIONS with Egypt go back a few thousand years. Egypt was already a regional power when the original Israelite people came into being. After the exodus from Egypt (which never really happened) the Bible tells us of many ups and downs in the relations between powerful Egypt and little Israel.

When the Assyrians laid siege to Jerusalem and the Judeans hoped for help from Egypt, the Assyrian general mocked: "Thou trustest upon the staff of this bruised reed, upon Egypt, on which, if a man lean, it will go into his hand and pierce it!" (2 Regnum 18 and Isaiah 36)

Now the current Pharaoh, Abd al-Fattah a-Sisi, is Netanyahu's great hope. Egypt, bankrupt as ever, depends on Saudi Arabia. The Saudis (secretly) depend on Israel in their

fight against Iran and Bashar Assad. So a-Sisi is also a (secret) ally of Israel.

To bolster his stature, a-Sisi also poses as a peace-maker. He calls for a "regional" peace initiative.

In his diatribe against the French, Dore Gold lauded the Egyptian peace initiative. He accused the French of sabotaging it, and thereby preventing peace.

Netanyahu also verbally accepted the Egyptian initiative, adding that it needs only "a few changes".

Indeed it does. a-Sisi bases his plan on the 2002 Saudi peace initiative, which had been adopted by the Arab league and become the Arab peace initiative. This demands that Israel leave all the occupied territories (including the Golan and East Jerusalem), accept the State of Palestine, the Right of Return of Palestinian refugees, etc. Netanyahu would die a thousand deaths before accepting any one of these.

Using the Egyptian plan as a pretext for rejecting the French plan is sheer chutzpah, based on the cynical assumption that one can indeed cheat all the world all the time.

"Regional", by the way, is the new buzz-word. It came up some time ago, and even some well-meaning Israelis adopted it. "Regional peace", how beautiful.

Instead of talking about peace with the hated Palestinians, let's talk about peace with the "region". Sounds good. But it is total nonsense.

No Arab leader, from Morocco to Iraq, will sign a peace agreement with Israel that does not include the end of the occupation and the creation of a Palestinian state. No one can. The masses of his people will not let him. Even Anwar al-Sadat included these provisions in his peace treaty with Menachem Begin (though in terms that could easily be broken).

When in 1949 my friends and I first put forward the solution that has become known as "two states for two peoples", it included, as a matter of course, peace with the entire Arab world. And peace with the Arab world will include, as a matter of course, peace with the State of Palestine. The two go together, like Siamese twins.

Speaking now of "regional peace" as an alternative to peace with the Palestinians is nonsense. "Regional peace" in that sense means no peace.

The other day Gideon Levy wrote in Haaretz that Netanyahu and Avigdor Lieberman "are now talking like Uri Avnery in 1969".

Very flattering. But, alas, only a trick.