

{SEPTEMBER 24, 2005}

A NEW CONSENSUS

In “The Second Coming”, the Irish poet W. B. Yeats described chaos thus: “Turning and turning in the widening gyre / The falcon cannot hear the falconer; / Things fall apart; the center cannot hold; / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, / The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere / The ceremony of innocence is drowned; / The best lack all conviction, while the worst / are full of passionate intensity.”

The defining phrase, as I read it, is “the center cannot hold”. It is a military metaphor: On the classical battlefield, the main force was located in the middle, with the flanks secured by lighter forces. The enemy’s aim was to break the center, often by turning the flanks. But even if the flanks collapsed, as long as the center held, the battle was not lost.

That also holds for a political struggle. Everything hinges on the public in the center. If one wants to make a revolution, the stability of the center must be undermined.

That was the aim of the settlers, when they started their nationwide campaign against the Gaza withdrawal. It ended in utter collapse, a defeat of historic proportions. In spite of the dramatic spectacle of the uprooting of the settlements, where everything was planned down to the minutest detail by the rabbis and the army, there was no real public crisis, no national trauma. In Yeats’ language: “The center held”.

To understand Israel, one has to comprehend the nature of this center. What convictions hold it together?

A national consensus is not immutable. It changes all the time, but very, very slowly, in an unseen, unfelt process. Only rarely, as a result of a dramatic occurrence, does it change rapidly. That happened, for example, in the 1967 war. A day before the war started, only a few of us dared to dream that the Arab world would recognize the State of Israel in its then borders. A day after, the dream had become a nightmare; anyone speaking about the “1967 borders” was considered a traitor. But that was an exceptional event. Ordinarily, the consensus moves as silently as a polar glacier.

The consensus of the Israeli-Jewish majority in the fall of 2005 rests on three pillars:

First: A Jewish State. That is the common denominator of almost all Jews in Israel. If one does not grasp the centrality of this conviction, one understands nothing about Israel.

“A Jewish state” is a state inhabited by Jews. True, it is unavoidable that some citizens will be non-Jews, but their number must be held to the absolute minimum, so that they are unable to have any influence on the character and policy of the state. This aim is embedded in the very substance of the Zionist movement, which started with a book called “Der Judenstaat”. It derives its force from the hundreds of years of persecution, when Jews, helpless and defenseless, were at the mercy of all.

The Jewish Israelis want to live in a state of their own, of themselves alone, where they are masters of their fate. This desire is anchored so deeply in the hearts of most of them, that there is no chance for any contrary plan - be it “Greater Israel” or a “bi-National State”. Consequently, there is no chance at all that the majority would agree to a massive return of Arab refugees to the territory of Israel.

Second: Enlarging the State. The Zionist movement wanted to take hold of the country then called Palestine, all or most of it, and to settle in it.

This, too, is a profound desire, imbedded in the very character of the movement, a part of its “genes”. But this second desire is subordinate to the first one. If there were a possibility of conquering the entire country and “getting rid” of all the Palestinian population, as proposed by the extreme right, it would certainly appeal to many. But the majority knows now that this is not a practical proposition. The conclusion is that the parts of the country with a dense Palestinian population must be “given up”.

Third: Recognition of the Palestinian People. That is a great change. It contradicts the classic position of the Zionist movement which was adopted by all Israeli governments until the Oslo agreement, expressed by the famous dictum of Golda Meir: “There is no such thing as a Palestinian people”. When, in the 1950s, we demanded the recognition the Palestinian people, we were considered traitors or fools, or both. But two intifadas, the international situation and our consistent public opinion campaign have done their work.

The combination of these three principles forms the picture of the present consensus: Israel must annex certain areas of the West Bank and relinquish the rest.

This consensus encompasses the major part of the Israeli political landscape, from Ariel Sharon, Binyamin Netanyahu and Uzi Landau to Shimon Peres and Yossi Beilin.

The disagreements concern only the extent of the annexation. It reminds one - *mutatis mutandis* - of the story attributed to Bernard Shaw, who offered to pay a duchess a million pounds to sleep with him. When she consented, he reduced his offer to a hundred pounds, saying: “now that we have agreed on the principle, all that

remains is to settle the price.”

Sharon has spoken in the past about annexing 58% of the West Bank, comprising the settlement blocs, Greater Jerusalem (with the territory connecting it to Ma'aleh Adumim) the Jordan valley and the areas between them. He was prepared to leave to the Palestinians their towns and densely populated rural areas. Recently, he has hinted that he might give up the Jordan Valley. He asserts that President Bush has agreed to his plan, but while Sharon talks about “settlement blocs”, Bush spoke about “population centers”. There is a big difference between the two: a “settlement bloc” includes not only the large settlement itself, but also the smaller ones around it and the area between them. A “population center” means only the large settlement itself, which would leave a much smaller area to be annexed.

At Camp David, Ehud Barak proposed the annexation of 21% of the West Bank, in a way that would have cut the Palestinian territory into pieces. He also wanted to “rent” 13% more in the Jordan valley. Later, at the Taba conference, the annexation came down to 8%, but the tentative accord was repudiated by the Israeli government.

Yossi Beilin was the father of the “settlement blocs” concept, when, long ago, he reached an unofficial agreement with Abu Mazen (Mahmoud Abbas). The more recent Geneva Initiative, proposed by Beilin and Yasser Abed-Rabbo, speaks only about an annexation of 2.3%, as part of a 1:1 territorial swap.

The Separation Fence now being built by the Sharon government is designed to further the ongoing enlargement of the settlements. It annexes 8% of the West Bank along its western border with Israel. The annexation of the Jordan valley in the East is, for the time being, left open.

These are the boundaries of the present consensus. The debate in Israel, in the near future, will center on the extent and the means of the annexation.

One version has it that there should be no negotiations with the Palestinians, since they will not agree to large annexations. Therefore, Israel should continue with “unilateral” steps, as practiced in the Gaza withdrawal - and annex territories without agreement. The slogan: “Israel itself will fix its borders”. The contrary version says that agreement can be achieved on a limited annexation within the framework of an exchange of territories.

The extreme right rejects this consensus. It does not want any compromise. It waves the divine title deed, personally signed by the Almighty, and wants to annex the entire West Bank and Gaza Strip. Without saying so explicitly, this concept means the total expulsion of the Palestinians from Palestine.

The radical peace movement opposes the consensus from the opposite direction. It believes that the future of Israel will only be secure in a lasting peace, based on an

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agreement between equals and the reconciliation of the two peoples. This camp believes that the agreement must be based on the pre-1967 Green Line border, and that only in the course of negotiations will it become clear if an understanding on fair territorial exchanges can be reached.

However, the main thing is that the consensus is moving. Greater Israel is dead. The partition of the country is now accepted by the overwhelming majority. This means that one can influence public opinion. The “disengagement” affair has shown that settlements can be removed. The public accepted the precedent without flinching. Now the task is to convince the public that real negotiations should be started.

There is someone to talk with, and there is something to talk about.