

{DECEMBER 3, 2005}

THE GIANT'S DAUGHTER

A German poem tells of the giant's daughter, who found a peasant plowing his field and brought him home in her handkerchief to show to her father. But the father said gravely: "The peasant is no toy!" and told her to put him gently back where she had found him.

The United States reminds me of the giant's daughter. Unfortunately, she has no grandfather to tell her that nations are not toys.

When George W. Bush became president, he brought with him a bunch of Neo-Conservatives who believed, in their incredible arrogance, that it is possible to overturn nations, change their regimes at will, and take control of their resources.

For starters, they intended to put Iraq, Iran and Syria in their handkerchief. Iraq and Iran because of their oil, Syria because of its strategic location. Quite incidentally, these three countries were also considered a strategic threat by Israel, and the neo-cons, most of them themselves Jews, were glad to do the "Jewish State" a favor.

The question was which of the three to conquer first, and the choice fell, as we know, on Iraq. Since the neo-cons were sure that their army would be received there with flowers (how else?) and the war would be over in a jiffy, the next question was who would come next, the eastern or the western neighbor.

Today, in retrospect, one can wonder which was the greater: the ignorance of the neo-cons or their arrogance. They had no idea about Iraq, and it seems that this did not bother them. After all, they knew that one stroke would suffice to finish the job and allow them to move on.

If they had consulted their British allies, they might have learned something about the country they were about to attack, for example that Iraq had never been a real state. It was composed of three distinct regions which had been joined together by the British Empire to suit its interests. It always needed a dictatorship to keep the package intact: first the British rulers themselves, later on assorted local dictators. Saddam Hussein was only the latest in the series.

When the US army destroyed the power that held it together, the whole thing fell

apart. Today, two parallel wars are tearing the poor country into shreds: the Sunni rebellion against the American occupation, and a three-fold civil war. In Washington, politicians blabber about the new Iraqi army that will, at any moment now, take over responsibility for security and allow the withdrawal of most American forces. In practice, there is no real Iraqi army at all, only separate militias of Kurds, Shiites and Sunnis, each of them ultimately loyal only to their particular leaders.

The Americans would like to withdraw most of their forces from Iraq and leave behind only a small garrison, to secure their hold on the oil resources. This is a rapidly fading dream. The end will probably be like Vietnam. American public opinion will come to detest the hopeless war and the army will withdraw with its tail between its legs, and leave behind a general state of anarchy.

As for the neighbors:

The Washington Neo-Cons have already dispersed in all directions, and military action against Iran and Syria is out of the question. Iraq is eating up the American military, which is composed of mercenaries, and already a shortage of soldiers is becoming acute. So what to do? Well, one can try to undermine the two states in other ways, turning Clausewitz's famous dictum on its head: "Politics is nothing more than the continuation of war by other means."

At this moment, a world-wide American campaign is under way, aimed at overthrowing the Syrian regime by non-military means. The General Secretary of the United Nations, who has become His (American) Master's Voice, is playing his role, together with many governments which are dependent on the mercies of the United States.

The murder of Rafik al-Hariri, the former Prime Minister of Lebanon, is being exploited for this purpose. I don't remember Washington ever getting so excited about a political murder in another country, whether of a progressive Bishop in Central America or a Muslim Sheikh in Gaza. This sudden urge to see the murderers brought to justice is really quite touching.

Our government is one of the most active partners in this campaign for the demolition of Syria. It renders assistance in a hundred ways. Syria is blamed for the actions of Hizballah in Lebanon, for helping Palestinian "terrorists", and what not. The Chief of our military intelligence department, who frequently voices almost infantile opinions in our media, is floating all kinds of conspiracy theories.

On the face of it, that is logical. In return, Washington has wiped the occupation of the Golan Heights from the international agenda. Condoleezza Rice is active in Gaza and the West Bank, but never utters a word about our occupation of the Golan, an area

of sovereign Syrian territory. The acquisition of territory by war is, of course, a severe violation of international law and the UN Charter, but George and Condi couldn't care less.

In spite of this, I would suggest that our government think twice whether we are really interested in destroying the Syrian state. If this happens, how will it affect our northern border?

I remember a conversation with Rabin in 1976, when the Syrians were invading Lebanon. Nowadays it is generally forgotten that it was the Christians who invited them in and requested their help against the PLO and Muslim forces.

When the Syrians were approaching the Israeli-Lebanese border, all hell broke loose in Israel. Defense Minister Shimon Peres and his minions clamored for a "red line" in Lebanon to stop the Syrian advance well away from the border. Prime Minister Rabin saw it quite differently. "That's idiotic," he told me. "On our border with Syria on the Golan Heights there are no problems. If the Syrians take hold of the Galilee border, quiet will reign there, too."

Rabin was, of course, quite right. Unfortunately, he gave in to Peres and the public hysteria. The Syrian army was stopped by our threats at a distance from the border. The vacuum thus created between it and Israel was filled first by the PLO, and later by Hizballah.

Much the same can happen now on the Syrian border, if the present Syrian regime collapses and anarchy takes over.

Syria is a very fragile state. True, this is not a case of three different peoples, as in Iraq, but there are profound, ancient rivalries between Damascus and Aleppo, Arabs and Kurds and many different religious denominations. The Syrians have resigned themselves to the dictatorship of the Assad family because they are afraid of anarchy.

(The Assads belong to one of the smallest sects, the Alawites, who are followers of Ali, the son-in-law of the prophet. This reminds one of the Biblical story about the selection of the first Israelite king. When Saul was invited by Samuel, he asked in wonderment: "Am I not a Benjamite, of the smallest of the tribes of Israel, and my family the least of all the families of the tribe of Benjamin?" (1. Samuel 9). When the largest and strongest tribes cannot agree on a candidate, they often prefer to pick one from the smallest and weakest, who poses no danger to them.)

For 33 years now, there have been no problems on our border with Syria, in spite of the unresolved conflict over the Golan. Who knows what will happen if Syria falls prey to anarchy? OK, that's no problem for America. But it certainly is for us.

AVNERY | THE GIANT'S DAUGHTER

Iran is a very different matter.

The Iranian nation is united and strong. They may produce a nuclear bomb. Many believe that this is a nightmare: a fanatical Islamic state, hating Israel, in the possession of the ultimate Weapon of Mass Destruction and the means to deliver it.

I am less worried. The extreme anti-Israeli slogans of Iran have not prevented it from engaging, quietly, in business with Israel, and not only in the Iran-gate affair. In practice, the terrible Ayatullahs do behave in a very sober way.

But if we want to avoid a nuclear Balance of Terror, there is only one way: to use the time left, while we still have a monopoly in this field, to make peace - first with the Palestinian people, and then with all the nations of the region. In the framework of peace, a nuclear-free zone with mutual inspection can be established.

The trouble is that it is impossible to discuss this issue here, as long as the matter is classified "top secret". I propose opening it up for debate and finally getting to grips with the problem. The time has come.

As for the giant's daughter, it is time to tell her: Leave the nations of this region alone! They are not toys!