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Uri Avnery's Column

Talking Zionism

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"HE TALKS Zionism," used to be a very derogatory comment when I was young. It meant that some elderly functionary had come to waste our time with a boring speech consisting largely of empty phrases.

That was before the foundation of the State of Israel. Since then, the term Zionism has been elevated to the status of a state ideology, if not state religion. Everything the state does is justified by the use of this word. Some would say that Zionism is the last refuge of a scoundrel.

When I visited Prague for the first time, right after the fall of the Communist regime, I was shown a hotel of incredible luxury – chandeliers from France, marble from Italy, rugs from Persia, the lot. I had never seen anything like it before. I was told that the place - or palace - had been reserved for the communist elite.

It's then and there that I understood the essence of a state ideology. Communist regimes were founded by idealists, imbued with humanist values. They ended as mafia states, in which a corrupt clique of cynics used the communist ideology as justification for privilege, oppression and exploitation.

I don't like state ideologies. States should not foster ideologies.

THE ONLY people who have an official confirmation that they are sane are those who have been released from psychiatric hospitals. In a similar way, I may be the only person in Israel who has an official confirmation that he is not an anti-Zionist.

It happened this way: when my friends and I founded the Israeli Council for Israeli-Palestinian Peace in 1975, a right-wing organ called us "anti-Zionists". I didn't give a damn, but my co-founders insisted on suing them for libel.

Since I had published a book entitled "Israel Without Zionists" a few years earlier, I was called by the defendants as their star witness. They grilled me for many hours on the witness stand on what I meant by this title. In the end the judge asked me to define my attitude towards Zionism in simple words. On the spur of the moment I coined a new term: "Post-Zionism".

Since then, the term has been expropriated as a synonym for anti-Zionism. But I used it quite literally. As I explained to the judge, my position is that Zionism was a historical movement with its glorious achievements as well as its darker side. One can admire or condemn it, but either way Zionism has come to its logical end with the creation of the State of Israel. Zionism was the scaffolding that made the building of the state possible, but once the house is built, the scaffolding becomes a hindrance and must be removed.

So the judge decided that I am not an anti-Zionist. She ordered the defendants to pay us hefty compensation, which helped us to finance our activities.

I still adhere to that definition.

NOWADAYS, WHEN the term Zionism is used in Israel, it can mean many different things.

For ordinary Jewish Israelis, it means not much more than Israeli patriotism, combined with the dogma that Israel is a "Jewish State", or the "State of the Jewish People". These definitions, by themselves, allow for many different interpretations. For the legendary "man or woman in the street" it means that the Jews around the world are a "people", and that Israel "belongs" to this people, though Jews have no rights in Israel unless they come here and receive citizenship. Of course, the Jews around the world have never been asked to decide whether Israel is their state or not.

From this point on, the definitions go in many different directions.

At the beginning, the dominant Zionist color was red (or at least pink). The Zionist dream was coupled with socialism (not necessarily of the Marxist kind), a movement that built the pre-state Jewish society in Palestine, the all-powerful trade union organization, the kibbutz and much more.

For religious Zionists (unlike the anti-Zionist Orthodox), Zionism was the forerunner of the Messiah, who would surely come if only all of us observed the shabbat. Religious Zionists want Israel to become a state governed by the Halakha, much as Islamists want their states to be governed by the Sharia.

Right-wing Zionists want Zionism to mean a Jewish state in all of historical Palestine, in their parlance "the Whole of Eretz Israel", with as few non-Jewish inhabitants as possible. This can easily be coupled with religious, and even messianic visions. God Wills It, as He has told them in confidence.

Theodor Herzl, the founder, wanted a liberal, secular state. Martin Buber, the outstanding humanist, called himself a Zionist. So did Albert Einstein. Vladimir Jabotinsky, the idol of right-wing Zionists, believed in a mixture of extreme nationalism, liberalism, capitalism and humanism. Rabbi Meir Kahane, an outright Fascist, was a Zionist. So, of course, are the settlers.

Many fanatical anti-Zionists around the world, including Jewish ones, would like to see Zionism as one monolith, so as to make it easier to hate. So, for the sake of love, do many lovers of Zion, most of whom would not dream of coming and living here.

Altogether, a rather bizarre picture.

TODAY, ZIONISM is firmly in the hands of the extreme Right, a mixture of nationalists, religious fanatics and the settlers supported by very rich Jews in Israel and outside.

They govern the news, both directly (they own all the TV networks and the newspapers) and metaphorically. Every day the news contains many items figuring "Zionism".

For Zionism's sake, Bedouin in Israel-proper are forcibly displaced from the large stretches of land they have occupied for centuries. For Zionism's sake, a settler's college deep in the occupied territories is accorded the status of "university" (by the military governor!), giving new impetus to the international academic boycott on Israel. Hundreds of new buildings in the settlements are being built on private Palestinian land in the name of Zionism. In Ramallah, the capital of the Palestinian authority, Israeli troops hunt for Africans without an Israeli immigration permit. Indeed, our Interior Minister, whose only passion seems to be hunting African job-seekers, uses the word Zionism in almost every sentence.

In the name of Zionism, our fanatically right-wing Minister of Education is sending Israeli school children on indoctrination trips to "holy places" in the occupied territory, so as to instill in their consciousness from early on that all the country belongs to them. To strengthen their Zionist convictions they are also sent to Auschwitz.

The settlers claim – not without some justification – that they are the only real Zionists, the rightful heirs of 130 years of Zionist settlement and expansion. This gives them the right to receive huge piles of state funds for their activities, while new taxes are being levied on even the poorest of the poor in Israel, such as another one-percent raise of VAT.

The Jewish Agency, an offshoot of the World Zionist Organization, is devoting almost all its resources to the settlements.

There is no faction in the Knesset (except the two small Arab factions and the predominantly Arab communist faction, and of course the Orthodox) that does not loudly proclaim its total devotion to Zionism. Indeed, the Zionist Left claims to be truer Zionists than the Right.

WHERE IS all this leading? Ah, there is the rub.

The current staunchly Zionist policy of the State of Israel contains an inherent paradox. It leads to self-destruction.

The policy of our government is based on maintaining the status quo. All of historical Eretz Israel/Palestine under Israeli rule, the West Bank in a state of occupation, its Palestinian inhabitants without national or civil rights.

If, at some point in the future, a right-wing government decides to annex the West Bank and the Gaza Strip "officially" (as Jerusalem and the Syrian Golan Heights were annexed long ago - unrecognized by the rest of the world - it will not make any real difference. Most Palestinians are already confined to enclaves resembling the South African Bantustans of bygone days.

In this Greater Israel, Palestinian Arabs will constitute a minority of at least 40%, growing rapidly to 50% and more, making it less and less convincing to call it a "Jewish State". The "Jewish and Democratic State" will be a thing of the past.

Of course, practically nobody in Israel would dream of according the Arab inhabitants of Greater Israel citizenship and democratic rights. If, perhaps by divine intervention, this were to come about, it would no longer be a "Jewish State". It would be an "Arab Palestinian state".

The only way out would be ethnic cleansing on a huge scale. Some of this is already happening discretely in remote areas. For some time now, in the most remote area of the West Bank, on the edge of the desert south of Hebron, the occupation authorities have been trying to remove the entire Arab population. This week, the Minister of Defense, Ehud Barak, declared the area a "military firing zone" that must be immediately evacuated. People who remain there risk being shot. Agriculturists may return and work on their land, but only on Shabbat and Jewish holidays, when the army is on leave. Zionism in action.

Currently, some five million Palestinians and six million Jews live between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River. The ethnic cleansing of the country is highly improbable, to say the least. Far more likely is the reality of an apartheid state, in which Jews will soon be a minority. That is not a reality envisioned by the Zionist founding fathers.

The only alternative is peace – Palestine and Israel, side by side. But that is called "post-Zionism", God forbid.

Our leaders escape this reality by a simple device: they don't think about it. They don't talk about it. They prefer to "talk Zionism" – a string of empty phrases.

But sometime in the future the contradictions of Zionism will have to be faced.

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