



Media Monitors Network

40 Bad Years

by Uri Avnery
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"Israel arouses different expectations than the Congo or Sudan. But for years now, hundreds of millions of people see it almost daily in the form of occupation soldiers, armed to the teeth, abusing a helpless population. The accumulating effect is becoming clear now."

"Rest has come to the tired / Repose to the toiler / A pale night covers / The fields of the Jezreel valley / Dew below and moon above / From Kibbutz Bet-Alfa to Moshav Nahalal..."

This is what we sang when we were young. Now it is a TV nostalgia show, youngsters of the 50s singing pioneer songs.

The thoughts wander. Who were the pioneers, the first to sing these songs? They came from rich homes in St. Petersburg, from some shtetl in Galicia, sons and daughters of university professors in Germany. They could have sailed to America, like most migrants at that time. But they were attracted to a remote eastern country, to a great national adventure. They lived in abject poverty, doing hard labor in the merciless sun that they were not accustomed to, and dreamed about a perfect human society.

They were real idealists. It did not occur to them that they were hurting human beings of another people. The Arabs were to them a part of the romantic landscape. They believed in all innocence that they were bringing blessings and progress to all inhabitants of the country.

As seen from today, four or five generations later, they look quite different. Their innocence is forgotten. It looks to many like rank hypocrisy, a cover for robbery and oppression.

That is one of the results of 40 years of occupation. The current settlers claim to be the successors of those pioneers of the 20s and 30s. They say that they are today's pioneers. These violent, thieving thugs really expect us to view the pioneers of old as their spiritual forebears.

When we add up all the damage that the occupation has done to us - to us too, and not only to the direct victims, the inhabitants of the occupied territories - let's not forget this. The occupation poisons the national memory. It soils not only the

present, but also the past, not only in the eyes of the world, but also in our own eyes.

It is enough to see what the occupation has done to the Jewish religion.

In my childhood I was taught at home that Judaism was a humane religion, a "light unto the Gentiles". Judaism means to loathe violence, to value the spiritual above the powerful, to turn an enemy into a friend. A Jew is allowed to defend himself - "If somebody comes to kill you, kill him first", as the Talmudic injunction goes - but not as a lover of violence and the intoxication of power.

What has remained of that?

Concerned friends recently e-mailed me some hair-raising quotes from a statement by Rabbi Mordechai Eliyahu, former Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel and the spiritual leader of the settlers and the entire religious Zionist camp. In a letter to the Prime Minister, the rabbi decreed that it is impermissible to have compassion with the civilian population of Gaza if that imperils Israeli soldiers. His son, Shmuel, interpreted this decree on behalf of his father: if the killing of 100 Arabs is not sufficient to stop the launching of Qassam rockets at Israel, then 1000 must be killed. And if that is not sufficient, then 10,000, and 100,000 and even a million. All this to stop the Qassams, which in all the years have not succeeded in killing a dozen Jews.

What is the connection between this "religious" view and the God who (in Genesis 18) promised not to destroy Sodom if 10 righteous people could be found there?

What is the difference between this moral perception and that of the Nazis who executed 10 hostages for every German soldier killed by the resistance?

The rabbi's decree did not arouse any reaction. There was no outcry, neither from his flock nor from the general public. The number of rabbis who publicly support such methods has risen to the hundreds. Most of them come from the settlements. This is a "religious" outlook that grew up in the poisoned atmosphere of the occupation, a religion of occupation. It shames the Jewish religion, present and past.

No wonder that a person with a strong religious conscience, Avraham Burg, former Speaker of the Knesset and Head of the Jewish Agency, this week renounced Zionism and demanded to abolish the definition of Israel as a Jewish State.

It is no longer anything new to point out that the occupation is destroying the Israeli army.

An army cannot fulfill its mission to defend the state against potential enemies when it has been engaged for decades as a colonial police force. One can give attractive names to a death-squad - Team Mango or Unit Peach - but it remains what it is: an instrument of brutal killing and oppression.

An officer who today plans the Mafia-style killing of a "senior militant" by an undercover action in the Kasbah of Nablus, will not be able tomorrow to lead a tank battalion against a sophisticated enemy. An army that shoots stone-throwers, chases children in the alleys of Balata refugee camp or drops a one-ton bomb on a residential building cannot turn overnight into an efficient force on a modern battlefield in a war of last resort.

No need to read this in the Winograd committee's report. It is enough to compare the commanders of 1967 - people like Yitzhak Rabin, Israel Tal, Ezer Weitzman, Dado Elazar and Matti Peled - with the corresponding figures of today. After 40 years of doing a contemptible job against a defenseless people, the army no longer attracts young people distinguished by original thinking and high motivation, by daring and resourcefulness. It attracts the mediocre of the mediocre.

In the Six-day War we had a small, sophisticated army that defended the state from within the Green Line, once described by Abba Eban as the "Auschwitz borders". This army needed hardly six days to overcome four opposing armies. Since then, after the territory was enlarged and ideal "security borders" were achieved, the army has become much bigger and its budget many times more bloated. The results could be seen in the Second Lebanon War.

From a military point of view, the occupation is a grave threat to the security of the state.

That leaves the Supreme Court. Opinion polls have shown that the public derides the Knesset and scorns the government, but respects the Supreme Court as a bastion of democracy and a source of pride.

Lately, it is becoming apparent that there was no solid basis for this. A moment after Chief Justice Aharon Barak retired from the Court, the entire judicial system started sinking into a morass of intrigues, mutual accusations and even slander. Not only in anonymous internet blogs, but also in the statements of the new Minister of Justice, the appointee of a Prime Minister dogged by personal corruption scandals.

How has this happened?

For many years now, the court has lived in a world of illusion. The judges have closed their eyes to their own doings. While believing that they are a pillar of liberalism and democracy, they have allowed extra-judicial executions. They have closed their eyes while torture has become routine. They have created mountains of sophistry arguing that the monstrous Wall is essential to security, trying to obscure the obvious fact that its main aim is the grabbing of land for the settlements.

When the International Court published its simple, clear and indisputable opinion that the Wall violates international law and several conventions which have been signed by Israel too, our Supreme Court just disregarded it.

A court that lies to itself in one sector cannot maintain its integrity in another. The "bastion of democracy" has been undermined, and may collapse entirely.

In the meantime, the book of laws is besmirched with racist legislation - from the law that prevents Israeli citizens from living in Israel with Palestinian spouses, to the bill which received this week primary approval in the Knesset, and which allows 80 members of the Knesset to expulse a Knesset member for voicing, both in the Knesset or outside, criticism of cabinet ministers or senior army commanders.

It cannot be denied: 40 years of occupation have changed the State of Israel beyond recognition.

That is obvious in all spheres of life. All of them have been contaminated.

18-year old youngsters, most of who have been brought up by decent parents as moral human beings, are drafted into the army, enter the brutal subculture of their units and receive an indoctrination that justifies every act of brutality against Arabs. Only a few rare individuals are able to withstand the pressure. After three years, the majority leave the army as tough men with blunted sensibilities. The brutality in our streets, the routine killings around the discotheques, the proliferation of rape and violence within the family - all these have undoubtedly been influenced by the day-to-day reality of the occupation. After all, it's the same people who are doing it.

A policeman who is sent to Hebron and the Hawara checkpoint, who treats the inhabitants there as inferior creatures, who acts sadistically or condones the sadism of his comrades - will he turn into a different person when he returns the next day to Tel Aviv, Haifa or Shefa-Amr? Will he wake up the next morning, miraculously, as a devoted servant of his fellow-citizens in a democratic society?

For years now, the security services, the police and the army have been lying about events in the occupied territories. Lying has become routine. Few journalists in the world now accept these statements unquestioningly. And when lying becomes the norm in one sector, the mendacity doesn't stop there. The liars of the army, the police and the other services have gotten used to lying about other matters, too.

In the "territories", corruption has a ball. Military government officers take off their uniforms and get involved in shady businesses. Capitalist barons also profit from connections with them. Of course, this is not the only source of the corruption that has become a bane of the state, but it is surely a contributing factor.

The occupation causes rot, which then penetrates all the pores of the national organism.

After 40 years, there is little similarity between the State of Israel as it is today and the state that the founders saw in their mind's eye: a model of social justice, equality and peace. The founders dreamed about a modern, enlightened, secular, liberal, socially progressive society with a flourishing economy benefiting all. Reality, as we known, has turned out very, very different.

True, the occupation cannot be blamed for everything. Before 1967, too, the young state was far from perfect. But the public felt then that this was a temporary

situation. Things could be corrected and improved. When the Israeli republic turned into a nascent Israeli empire, the dramatic deterioration started.

At the end of the Six-Day War, the entire world saluted us. Little, brave David had won against Goliath. Now it is we who are seen as a heartless, brutal Goliath.

The boycott against Israel announced by several foreign organizations must turn on a red light. In the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson wrote that every nation must behave with "a decent respect for the opinion of mankind". That was not only a matter of ethics but also of practical common sense. For us to maintain an occupation that violates international law is spitting in the eye of enlightened humanity.

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One can treat the opinion of mankind with disdain, in the spirit of Stalin's question "How many divisions does the Pope have?" But that is stupid. International opinion can express itself in a thousand different ways. It influences the policy of governments and civil society. The attempts at boycott are only an early symptom.

But beyond all the bad things the occupation has brought upon Israel, inside and outside, there is something that concerns each of us. Every human being wants to be proud of his country. The occupation deprives us of this.

On the 40th anniversary of the occupation of East Jerusalem, a foreign TV station wanted to interview me in the Muslim quarter of the Old City. We walked in the Via Dolorosa, the Way of the Cross. The street was almost empty. The owners of the shops offering antiques, precious carpets and souvenirs stood in their doorways, radiating despair, and tried to lure us in.

From time to time, small groups of tourists went past. Each group was accompanied by four security guards in white overalls, two in front and two behind. Every one of them was holding in his hand a loaded pistol, ready to open fire within a split second. That's how they walked in the street.

That is the reality of "Jerusalem Reunited and Indivisible, the Capital of Israel for All Eternity", as the official slogan goes, 40 years after its "liberation".

Source:

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