

{SEPTEMBER 6 2006}

“LEFT, BUT . . .”

I once saw a nice sketch in a political cabaret: on the stage several people were speaking in unconnected sentences, all of which ended with the word “but”. For example: “Some of my best friends are Jews, but...”, “I have nothing against blacks, but...”, “I really detest racism, but...”

During the recent war, I frequently heard similar phrases: “I am a leftist, but...” These words were invariably – but invariably! – followed by a rightist statement.

It seems that we have a whole community of “leftists-but”, who propose the annihilation of entire Lebanese villages, the turning of Lebanon into a heap of ruins, the destruction over the heads of its inhabitants of any building where Hassan Nasrallah may (or may not) be staying. And, while we are at it, also to wipe Gaza from the face of the earth.

Encountering such sentences on TV, on the radio and in the papers, I am sometimes tempted to pray: Dear God, give me honest to goodness fascists instead of these leftists-but.

While analyzing the Second Lebanon War, it is impossible to ignore the role played by the Leftists, with or without quotation marks, during the fighting.

The day before yesterday I saw on TV an interview with the playwright Joshua Sobol, a likeable person known as a regular leftist. He explained that this war has brought us important benefits, and sang the praises of the Minister of Defense, Amir Peretz.

Sobol is not alone. When the government started this war, an impressive line-up of writers supported it. Amos Oz, A.B.Yehoshua and David Grossman, who regularly appear as a political trio, were united again in their support of the government and used all their considerable verbal talents to justify the war. They were not satisfied with that: some days after the beginning of the war, the three published a joint ad in the papers, expressing their enthusiastic backing for the operation.

Their support was not purely passive. Amos Oz, a writer with considerable literary prestige throughout the world, wrote an article in favor of the war, which appeared in several respected foreign newspapers. I wouldn’t be surprised if “somebody” helped to

distribute it. His two comrades, too, were active in propagating the war, together with a long row of writers like Yoram Kaniuk, assorted artists and intellectuals, real or imagined. All of them volunteered for the propaganda reserves without waiting to be drafted.

I doubt that the war would have attained its monstrous dimensions without the massive support of Leftists-but, which made it possible to form a “wall to wall consensus”, ignoring the protest of the consistent peace camp. This consensus carried away the Meretz party, whose guru Amos Oz is, and Peace Now, in whose mass rallies Amos Oz used to be the main speaker (when they were still able to stage mass rallies).

Some people are now pretending that this group was really against the war. To wit: some days before the end they published a second tripartite ad, this time calling for its termination. At the same time, Meretz and Peace Now also changed course. But not one of them apologized or showed remorse for their prior support for the killing and devastation. Their new position was: the war was indeed very good, but now the time has come to put an end to it.

What is the logic of this position?

The government decided on the attack in apparent response to the action of Hizbullah, which captured two Israeli soldiers on the Israeli side of the border and proposed exchanging them for Lebanese prisoners held in Israel. In this action, several comrades of the captured soldiers were killed, and some more soldiers died when their tank hit a mine while pursuing the captors on the Lebanese side of the border.

The Israeli public reacted, of course, with fury and cries for revenge. But one would have expected intellectuals, and especially “leftist” ones, to keep a cool head, even – and perhaps especially – during times of emotional upheaval. In similar circumstances, even Ariel Sharon avoided extreme reactions and agreed to exchange prisoners.

Those who did not possess the courage for that (“oz” in Hebrew means strength and courage), or those who really believed that the Hizbullah action must be met with a strong reaction, could have justified a limited military reprisal. On that day it was legitimate to join those who demanded such a reasonable reaction. But already after 48 hours, it was clear that the reaction was not proportional but massive. It was not designed to “send a message” to Hizbullah and all the Lebanese people that such a provocation would not go unpunished. It had quite different aims.

On the second or third day of the war, it was already quite clear to any thinking person – and don’t intellectuals pride themselves on being just that? – that this was a real war, which went far beyond the problem of the two captured soldiers. The systematic bombardment of the Lebanese infrastructure bore witness to the fact that it was prepared well in advance and that its aim was the annihilation of Hizbullah and

the changing of the political realities in Lebanon. For that it was enough to listen to the declarations of Olmert, Peretz and Halutz.

That was the real test of the intellectuals. One can forgive them for their first reaction. One can say that they were carried away, as happens to people at the beginning of a war. One can say that they did not understand the context (a terrible accusation, when thrown in the face of intellectuals). But from the third day on, such justifications and excuses do not stand up anymore.

The army chiefs did not hide the horrible devastation they were causing in Lebanon – on the contrary, they boasted about it. It was clear that appalling suffering was being caused to hundreds of thousands, that civilians were being killed in large numbers, that many, many people were losing all their possessions in the villages and towns that were being systematically destroyed. At the same time, great suffering was caused to the population of Northern Israel.

How could writers with a conscience, and even more so “leftists” with a humane outlook, keep quiet while these atrocities were being committed? How could they go on serving the propaganda machine of the war?

True, the writers could not know that already on the sixth day of the war the army chiefs had told the government that all achievable aims of the war had by now been achieved, and that nothing more could be attained (such as the return of the prisoners, the restoration of the army’s deterring power, the disarming of Hizbullah etc.) In other words, that even from a purely military point of view, there was no point continuing the horror, which nevertheless went on for another 27 days and nights. But if any protest from the famous writers, even a faint one, had been heard, it could have induced the political and military leaders to think again. But there was no such protest.

When the writers did wake up after all, in the 5th (fifth!) week of the war, and called for its termination, it was too late. There was no need for them anymore. The cumbersome machinery of the UN was already engaged in achieving the cessation of hostilities.

One tragic event was the death in combat of David Grossman’s son, Uri, in those last hours of the war.

What caused the “Left-but” to behave like that?

One can find superficial reasons. It is very hard for leftists to rise up against a government in which the Labor party plays an important role. That was also true in 2000, when the Labor leader, Ehud Barak, wrecked the Camp David summit and returned with the fatal slogan: “We have no partner! There is no one to talk with!”

But that was not true in the First Lebanon War, in 1982, when the Likud was in power. Because even then the “Left-but”, under the leadership of Shimon Peres and Yitzhak

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Rabin, did support the war. During the siege of Beirut, Rabin was the guest of Sharon, and, standing on the ruins, proposed cutting off the supply of water and medicines to the population of the besieged Western part of the city (where I was meeting with Yasser Arafat at the same time). Only after the third week of the war, did Peace Now join the protest against it.

After the Sabra and Shatila massacre, Peace Now called for the protest rally on which its reputation has rested since – the rally with the fabled 400 thousand protesters. That was its brightest spot and the beginning of its eclipse. Because, in order to assure the dimensions of the demonstration, Peace Now made a pact - not with the devil, but with hypocrisy. In return for the help of the Labor Party, they invited Peres and Rabin to be the main speakers - in spite of the fact that on the eve of the war, the two had met with Menachem Begin and publicly requested him to invade Lebanon.

But there are more profound causes for the behavior of the “Left-but” in times of war.

From the beginning of the Jewish Labor Movement in the country, the Left has suffered from an internal contradiction: it was both socialist and nationalist. Of the two components, nationalism was by far the more important. Therefore, membership in the trade union organization (Histadrut) was based on a strictly national classification: not a single Arab was allowed to become a member in the body whose official name was “The General Organization of the Hebrew Workers in Eretz-Israel”. Only years after the foundation of the State of Israel were Arabs allowed to join.

One of the most important tasks of the Histadrut was to prevent by all means, including violence, the employment of Arabs in Jewish working places. For that, blood was shed.

That is true also for the most glorious of socialist creations: the kibbutz. No Arab was ever allowed to become a member. That was no accident: the kibbutzim saw themselves not only as a realization of a socialist dream, but also as fortresses in the Jewish struggle for the country. The creation of a new kibbutz, like Hanita on the Lebanese border in 1938, was celebrated as a national victory.

The most leftist part of the kibbutz movement, Hashomer Hatsa’ir, (the basis of the late Mapam party, now Meretz) had an official slogan: “For Zionism, Socialism and the Brotherhood of Peoples”. The order was not accidental, either: it expressed the real priorities. Hashomer Hatsa’ir did indeed adore Stalin, “the sun of the peoples”, until his death, but its main creations were the settlements, generally on land bought from rich absentee landowners, after the Fellahin, who had tended them for generations, had been evicted. After the founding of Israel, the Hashomer Hatza’ir kibbutzim were settled on the lands of the refugees and lands expropriated from the Arab citizens of Israel proper. The kibbutz Bar’am is sitting on the land of the village Bir’am, from

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which the Arab inhabitants were evicted after the end of the fighting in 1948. Much Zionism, very little Brotherhood of Peoples.

In every real test, this internal contradiction of the “Zionist Left” (as they like to call themselves) becomes obvious. That is the root of the split personality of the “Left-but”.

When the guns are roaring and the flag goes up the pole, the “Left-but” stands at attention and salutes.