

{JUNE 10 2006}

OH, WHAT A WONDERFUL PLAN

Nine months before he invaded Lebanon, Ariel Sharon let me in on his grand design for solving all the problems of this region. It was mind-boggling. He did not ask me to keep it secret, just not to attribute it to him directly. I published it accordingly.

Sharon, then the freshly appointed Minister of Defense, was not satisfied with modest steps for improving the situation in the country between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River. He wanted to change the face of the entire region, over four countries. The main points: To expel the Syrians from Lebanon; to establish there a Maronite-Christian dictator (Bashir Gemayel); to transfer the Palestinians from Lebanon to Syria, and from there to Jordan; to encourage a Palestinian revolution in Jordan to overthrow King Hussein and turn Jordan into a Palestinian state under Yasser Arafat; to negotiate with the Palestinian government in Amman about the future of the West Bank. One possibility: to create a situation there that would allow Israel to establish settlements all over the West Bank and the Palestinians there to vote for the parliament in Amman.

This was the plan which inspired Sharon to march into Lebanon in the summer of 1982. It was not quite successful. Actually, the results were the opposite of what he expected: Israel got stuck in the Lebanese quagmire for 18 years, and in the end barely escaped. The Maronite-Christians did indeed massacre hundreds in Sabra and Shatila to frighten the Palestinians into fleeing to Syria, but they did not budge. Bashir Gemayel was appointed President unopposed but murdered soon after. The Syrians stayed in Lebanon for another 23 years, and, upon leaving, left behind Hizballah. Arafat did not go to Amman but to Tunis, returning twelve years later to Palestine, after Israel had recognized the PLO and signed the Oslo agreement.

This historic fiasco sprang to mind this week when I saw the grandiose plan of another strategic genius: Major-General Giora Eiland, former chief of the Army Operations Department, until recently chief of the National Security Council, the Government department charged with formulating national strategy.

AVNERY | OH, WHAT A WONDERFUL PLAN

Like Sharon, General Eiland dreams of rearranging the entire region, from the foundations up. His grand design is no less impressive than that of Sharon. Not the Separation Plan, God forbid, but the grand design I mentioned earlier. Eiland has only contempt for Sharon's Separation and Olmert's Convergence, holding both Sharon and Olmert to be mere dilettantes who know nothing about staff work and orderly deliberations, but make decisions according to their gut feelings.

As he disclosed to Haaretz interviewer Ari Shavit, Eiland has a much more serious and worked-out plan, as follows:

To annex to Israel 12% of the West Bank, 600 sq. km. at least, in order to safeguard the security of Israel with defensible borders.

To take 600 sq. km of North Sinai from Egypt and join them to the Gaza Strip, to enable the Palestinians to build a seaport and an international airport there, as well as a city of a million people.

To compensate Egypt with 150 sq. km. of Israeli land in the Negev.

To allow the digging of a tunnel between Egypt and Jordan under Israeli territory near Eilat.

To transfer 100 sq. km. of Jordan to the Palestinians, as compensation for the territory Israel will take from the West Bank.

I have seen dozens – perhaps hundreds – of plans thought up by good people, who have wonderful ideas for the solution of the conflict. Hardly a month goes by without somebody e-mailing me another one. Eiland's plan is no worse than the other utopias. Unfortunately, it is also no better.

But there is one big difference: the proud author of this plan is a man who played a central role in the highest ranks of the security establishment. His ideas may indicate something about the mental patterns prevalent there.

A person has to be really naïve, and devoid of any political understanding, to believe that it would be possible to convince three governments – the Palestinian, Egyptian and Jordanian, not to mention the Israeli – to give up part of their territory.

Worse: one needs a certain mindset to treat large numbers of human beings as if they were chess figures to be moved about from state to state, from here to there.

True, in the first half of the 20th century this was indeed done. After World War I, the statesmen sat down and rearranged the map of the world, dismantling states here and putting together new ones there. Most of the results were disastrous. After World War II, Stalin did the same. He annexed to the Soviet Union a big chunk of Poland, and compensated Poland with a big chunk of Germany. Until now, it has worked. Adolf Hitler, of course, intended to do much the same in the other direction.

In our reality, this idea is totally impractical. There is no chance in the world that

AVNERY | OH, WHAT A WONDERFUL PLAN

Egypt would give up a chunk of land in return for a much smaller patch of desert. Menachem Begin already found out how sensitive the Egyptians are in this regard. It touches the deepest strings of their national soul. In the end, the Egyptians did not give up one square millimeter of their territory. Witness: the Taba affair.

The chance that Jordan would sacrifice fertile land for the Palestinians is even slimmer. Like many Israeli army officers, Eiland, so it seems, has deep contempt for Jordan. Just as he does not understand the Egyptians, he does not understand the ruling class of the Hashemite Kingdom. It is - with reason - uncommonly sensitive to the dangers lurking all around it. But it enjoys, of course, the unwavering support of the United States and the United Kingdom.

It is not even worthwhile considering the possibility that the United States and Europe would lend a hand to such a game of switching around people and territories. Europe sanctifies existing borders. It has learned from bloody experience that there is nothing more dangerous than moving borders. Once started, no one knows where it will end.

Eiland does not burden himself with the practical details of his grandiose plans. He leaves all that, so it seems, to the politicians - the same politicians he so despises. Like the inventor who wanted to slow down the revolution of the globe, when asked how this should be done, he replies: "I have the ideas. The implementation is the job of the technicians."

Years ago Boutrus Boutrus-Ghali, then the acting foreign minister of Egypt, told me with a thin ironic smile: "You Israelis have the best experts on Arab affairs in the world. They have read all the books, all the articles. They know everything -and understand nothing, because they have never lived one single day in an Arab country."

General Eiland seems to be no exception.