

Israel: “All Quiet on the Eastern Front”

By [Uri Avnery](#)

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People endowed with sensitive political ears were startled this week by two words, which, so it seemed, escaped from the mouth of Binyamin Netanyahu by accident: “Eastern front”.

Once upon a time these words were part of the everyday vocabulary of the occupation. In recent years they have been gathering dust in the political junkyard.

The verbal couple “Eastern front” was born after the Six-day War. It served to buttress the strategic doctrine that the Jordan River is Israel’s “security border”.

The theory: there is a possibility for three Arab armies – those of Iraq, Syria and Jordan – to gather east of the Jordan, cross the river and endanger the existence of Israel. We must stop them before they enter the country. Therefore, the Jordan Valley must serve as a permanent base for the Israeli army, our troops must stay there.

This was a doubtful theory to start with. In order to take part in such an offensive, the Iraqi army would have to assemble, cross the desert and deploy in Jordan, a lengthy and complex logistical operation that would give the Israeli army ample time to hit the Iraqis long before they reached the bank of the Jordan. As for the Syrians, it would be much easier for them to attack Israel on the Golan Heights than to move their army south and attack from the east. And Jordan has always been a secret – but loyal – partner of Israel (except for the short episode of the Six-day War.)

In recent years, the theory has become manifestly ridiculous. The Americans have invaded Iraq and defeated and disbanded Saddam Hussein’s glorious army, which turned out to be a paper tiger. The Kingdom of Jordan has signed an official peace treaty with Israel. Syria is using every opportunity to demonstrate its longing for peace, if Israel would only return the Golan Heights. In short, Israel has nothing to fear from its Eastern neighbors.

True, situations can change. Regimes change, alliances change. But it is impossible to imagine a situation in which three terrifying armies cross the Jordan into Canaan, like the children of Israel in the Biblical story.

Moreover, the idea of a ground attack, like the Nazi blitzkrieg in World War II, belongs to history. In any future war, long-range missiles will play a dominant role. One could imagine the Israeli soldiers in the Jordan valley reclining on deckchairs and observing the missiles flying over their heads in both directions.

So how did this silly idea gain new life?

IT MAY be useful to go 43 years back in time, in order to understand how this bogeyman was born.

Only six weeks after the Six-day War, the “Allon plan” was launched. Yigal Allon, then Minister of Labor, submitted it to the government. It was not adopted officially, but it did exercise a major influence on the Israeli leadership.

No authorized map of the plan was ever published, but the main points became known. Allon proposed to annex to Israel the Jordan Valley and the western shore of the Dead Sea. What was left of the West Bank would become enclaves surrounded by Israeli territory, except for a narrow corridor near Jericho which would connect the West Bank with the Jordanian kingdom. Allon also proposed annexing to Israel certain areas in the West Bank, the North of Sinai (“the Rafah Opening”) and the South of the Gaza Strip (“the Katif Bloc”).

He did not care whether the West Bank would be returned to Jordan or become a separate Palestinian entity. Once I attacked him from the Knesset rostrum and accused him of obstructing the establishment of the Palestinian state, which I advocated, and when I returned to my seat, he sent me a note: “I am for a Palestinian state in the West Bank. So how am I less of a dove than you?”

The plan was put forward as a military imperative, but its motives were quite different.

In those days I met with Allon fairly regularly, so I had the opportunity to follow his line of thought. He had been one of the outstanding commanders of the 1948 war and was considered a military expert, but above all he was a leading member of the Kibbutz movement, which at the time exercised a lot of influence in the country.

Immediately after the seizure of the West Bank, the people of the Kibbutz movement spread out across the ground, looking for areas that would be suitable for intensive modern agriculture. Naturally, they were attracted to the Jordan Valley. From their point of view, this was an ideal place for new kibbutzim. It has plenty of water, the terrain is flat and eminently suited to modern agricultural machinery. And, most important, it was sparsely populated. All these advantages were lacking in other West Bank regions: their population was dense, the topography mountainous and the water scarce.

In my opinion, the entire Allon plan was a fruit of agricultural greed, and the military theory was nothing but an expedient security pretext. And, indeed, the immediate result was the setting up of a great number of kibbutzim and moshavim (cooperative villages) in the valley.

Years passed before the limits of the Allon Plan were burst open and settlements were established all over the West Bank.

THE ALLON PLAN gave birth to the bogeyman of the “Eastern Front” and since then it has terrorized those who seek peace. Like a ghost, it comes and goes, materializes and vanishes, once in one form, once in another.

Ariel Sharon demanded the annexation of the “widened valley”. The valley itself, a part of the Great Syrian-African Rift Valley, is 120 km long (from the Sea of Galilee to the Dead Sea) but only about 15 km wide. Sharon demanded almost obsessively the addition to it of the “back of the mountain”, meaning the eastern slope of the central West Bank mountain range, which would have widened it substantially.

When Sharon adopted the Separation Wall project, it was supposed to separate the West Bank not only from Israel proper, but also from the Jordan Valley. This would have enabled

what was called the “Allon Plan plus”. The wall would have encircled the entire West Bank, without the Jericho corridor. This plan has not been implemented to date, both because of international opposition and because of lack of funds.

Since the Oslo agreement, almost all successive Israeli governments have insisted that the Jordan Valley must remain in Israeli hands in any future peace agreement. This demand appeared in many guises: sometimes the words were “security border”, sometimes “warning stations”, sometimes “military installations”, sometimes “long-term lease”, depending on the creative talents of successive Prime Ministers. The common denominator: the valley should remain under Israeli control.

NOW COMES Netanyahu and resurrects the verbal duo “Eastern Front”.

What Eastern Front? What threats are there from our eastern neighbors? Where is Saddam Hussein? Where is Hafez al-Assad? Is Mahmoud Ahmadinejad going to send the armored columns of the Revolutionary Guards rolling towards the Jordan crossings?

Well, it goes like this: the Americans are going to leave Iraq some day. Then a new Saddam Hussein will arise, this time a Shiite, and ally himself with Shiite Iran and the treacherous Turks, and how can you rely on the Jordanian king who abhors Netanyahu? Terrible stuff may happen if we don’t keep watch on the bank of the Jordan!

This is manifestly ludicrous. So what is the real aim?

The entire world is now busy with the American demand for starting “direct talks” between Israel and the Palestinian Authority. One might be tempted to think that world peace depends on turning the “proximity talks” into “direct talks”. Never have so many words of sanctimonious hypocrisy been poured out on such a trivial subject.

The “proximity talks” have been going on for several months now. It would be wrong to say that their results have been close to zero. They were zero. Absolute zero. So what will happen if the two parties sit together in one room? One can predict with absolute certainty: Another zero. In the absence of an American determination to impose a solution, there will be no solution.

So why does Barack Obama insist? There is one explanation: throughout the Middle East, his policies have failed. He is in urgent need of an impressive achievement. He promised to leave Iraq, and the situation there makes it impossible. The war in Afghanistan is going from bad to worse, a general leaves and a general arrives, and victory is further away than ever. One can already imagine the last American climbing into the last helicopter on the roof of the American embassy in Kabul.

Remains the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Here, too, Obama is facing failure. He hoped to achieve much without investing anything at all, and was easily defeated by the Israel lobby. To hide the shame, he needs something that can be presented to the ignorant public as a great American victory. The renewal of “direct talks” is meant to be such a victory.

Netanyahu, on his part, is quite satisfied with the situation as it is. Israel is calling for direct talks, the Palestinians refuse. Israel is extending its hand for peace, the Palestinians turn away. Mahmoud Abbas demands that Israel extend the freeze on the settlements and declares in advance that the negotiations will be based on the 1967 borders.

But the Americans are exerting tremendous pressure on Abbas, and Netanyahu fears that Abbas will give in. Therefore he declares that he cannot freeze the settlements, because in that case – God forbid! – his coalition would disintegrate. And if that does not suffice, here comes the Eastern Front. The Israeli government is giving notice to the Palestinians that it will not give up the Jordan Valley.

In order to emphasize the point, Netanyahu has started to remove the remaining Palestinian population in the valley, a few thousand. Villages are being eradicated, starting this week with Farasiya, where all the dwellings and the water installations were destroyed. This is ethnic cleansing pure and simple, much like the similar operation now going on against the Bedouins in the Negev.

What Netanyahu is saying, in so many words, is: Abbas should think twice before he enters “direct talks”.

THE JORDAN Valley descends to the lowest point on the surface of the earth, the Dead Sea, 400 meters below mean sea level.

The revival of the Eastern Front may indicate the lowest point of Netanyahu’s policy, with the intent of putting to death once and for all any remaining chance for peace.

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