

Manifest Destiny?

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Global Research, April 14, 2008

[Gush Shalom](#) 14 April 2008

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

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NEXT MONTH, Israel will celebrate its 60th anniversary. The government is working feverishly to make this day into an occasion of joy and jubilation. While serious problems are crying out for funds, some 40 million dollars have been allocated to this aim.

But the nation is in no mood for celebrations. It is gloomy.

From all directions the government is blamed for this gloom. "They have no agenda" is the refrain, "Their only concern is their own survival." (The word "agenda", with its English pronunciation, is now fashionable in Israeli political circles, pushing aside a perfectly adequate Hebrew word.)

It is hard not to blame the government. Ehud Olmert speechifies endlessly, at least one speech per day, today at an industrialists' convention, tomorrow at a kindergarten, saying absolutely nothing. There is no national agenda, nor an economic agenda, nor a social agenda, nor a cultural agenda. Nothing.

When he came to power, he presented something that sounded like an agenda: "Hitkansut", an untranslatable word that can be rendered as "contracting", "converging", "ingathering". That was supposed to be a historic operation: Israel would give up a large part of the occupied territories, dismantle the settlements east of the "Separation" Wall and annex the settlements between the Green Line and the Wall.

Now, two years and one war later, nothing of this remains, even the word has been forgotten. The only game in town is the "negotiations" with the Palestinian Authority, which were a farce to start with. Like actors on the stage drinking from empty glasses, all parties pretend that there are negotiations going on. They meet, embrace, smile, pose for photographs, convene joint teams, hold press conferences, make declarations - and nothing, absolutely nothing, really happens.

What is the farce for? Each of the participants has his own reasons: Olmert needs an agenda to fill the void. George Bush, a lame duck who leaves behind him nothing but ruins in every field, wants to present at least one achievement, fictitious as it may be. Poor Mahmoud Abbas, whose continued existence depends on his ability to show some political achievement for his people, clings to this illusion with all his remaining strength. And so the farce goes on.

BUT ANYONE who believes that the government has no agenda, and that the State of Israel has no agenda, is quite wrong. There certainly is an agenda, but it is hidden. More precisely: it is unconscious.

People say that ideology is dead. That, too, is a mistake. There is no society without an ideology, and there is no human being without an ideology. When there is no new ideology, the old ideology continues to operate. When there is no conscious ideology, there is an unconscious one, which can be much more potent – and much more dangerous.

Why? A conscious ideology can be analyzed, criticized, opposed. It is much more difficult to fight against an unconscious one, which directs the agenda without giving itself away.

That's why it is so important to locate, uncover and analyze it.

IF YOU ask Olmert, he will strenuously deny that he has no agenda. He has a perfect agenda: to make peace (which is nowadays called "permanent status"). And not just any peace, but a peace based on "Two States for Two Peoples". Without such a peace, Olmert has pronounced, "the State is finished".

In that case, why is there no negotiation, only a farcical pretense? Why does the massive building activity go on, even in the settlements east of the Wall, well within the area that government spokespersons propose for the Palestinian state? Why does the government carry out dozens of military and civilian actions daily that push peace even further away?

According to the government itself, and contrary to what it said at the beginning, it has no intention of achieving peace in 2008. At most, perhaps, maybe, there will be a "shelf agreement". That is an original Israeli invention, meaning an agreement that would be put on the shelf "until conditions are ripe". In other words, meaningless negotiations for a meaningless agreement. Now they say that there is no chance even for that, not in 2008, not in the foreseeable future.

There is no escape from the inevitable conclusion: the government is not working for peace. It does not want peace. And, also, that there is no effective parliamentary opposition pressing for peace, nor any pressure from the media.

What does all this mean? That there is no agenda? No, it means that behind the fictitious agenda, which appears in the media, there hides another agenda that does not meet the eye.

THE HIDDEN agenda is opposed to peace. Why?

Conventional wisdom has it that the government does not pursue peace because it is afraid of the settlers and their supporters. The peace that is being talked about – the peace of Two States for Two Peoples – demands the dismantling of dozens of settlements, including those which harbor the political and ideological leadership of the whole movement. That would mean a declaration of war on all the 250 thousand settlers, apart from those who will leave voluntarily for generous compensation. The current argument is that the government is too weak for such a confrontation.

According to the fashionable formula, "both governments, the Israeli and the Palestinian, are too weak to make peace. Everything must be postponed until strong leaderships emerge on both sides." Some people add the Bush administration to the count – a lame duck president cannot impose peace.

But the settlements are only a symptom, not the heart of the problem. Otherwise, why

doesn't the government freeze them, at least, as it has undertaken again and again? If the settlements are the main obstacle to peace, why are they being enlarged even now, and why are new settlements still being set up, disguised as new "neighborhoods" of existing settlements?

Clearly, the settlements, too, are in reality only a pretext. Something more profound is causing the government – and the entire political system – to reject peace.

That is the hidden agenda.

WHAT IS the heart of peace? A border.

When two neighboring peoples make peace, they fix, first of all, the border between them.

And that is precisely what the Israeli establishment opposes, because it negates the basic ethos of the Zionist enterprise.

True, at different points in time the Zionist movement has drawn up maps. After World War I, it submitted to the peace conference the map of a Jewish state extending from the Litani River in Lebanon to El-Arish in the Sinai desert. The map of Vladimir Ze'ev Jabotinsky, which became the Irgun emblem, copied the borders of the original British Mandate on both sides of the Jordan. Israel Eldad, one of the Stern Group leaders, distributed for many years a map of the Israeli Empire that reached from the Mediterranean to the Euphrates and included all of Jordan and Lebanon, with great chunks of Syria and Egypt thrown in. His son, the extreme right-wing Member of the Knesset Ariele Eldad, has not given up this map. And after the Six Day War, the map favored by the right-wing covered all the conquests, including the Golan Heights and the entire Sinai peninsula.

But all these maps were only games. The real Zionist vision does not recognize any maps. It is a vision of a state without borders – a state that expands at all times according to its demographic, military and political power. The Zionist strategy resembles the waters of a river flowing to the sea. The river snakes through the landscape, goes around obstacles, turns left and right, flowing sometimes on the surface and sometimes underground, and on its way takes in more springs. In the end it reaches its destination.

That is the real agenda, unchanging, hidden, conscious and unconscious. It does not need decisions, formulations or maps, because it is encoded in the genes of the movement. This explains, among other things, the phenomenon described in the report of senior prosecution lawyer Talia Sasson on the settlements: that all the organs of the establishment, the government and the military, without any official coordination but with miraculously effective cooperation, acted to set up the "illegal" settlements. Every one of the thousands of officials and officers who spent decades involved in this enterprise knew exactly what to do, even without receiving any instructions.

That is the reason for David Ben-Gurion's refusal to include in the Declaration of Independence of the new State of Israel any mention of borders. He did not intend for a minute to be satisfied with the borders fixed by the United Nations General Assembly resolution of November 29, 1947. All his successors had the same approach. Even the Oslo agreements delineated "zones" but did not fix a border. President Bush accepted this approach when he proposed a "Palestinian state with provisional borders" – a novelty in international law.

In this respect, too, Israel resembles the United States, which was founded along the Eastern seaboard and did not rest until it had reached the Western shores on the other side of the continent. The incessant stream of mass immigration from Europe flowed on westwards, breaching all borders and violating all agreements, exterminating the Native Americans, starting a war against Mexico, conquering Texas, invading Central America and Cuba. The slogan that drove them on and justified all their actions was coined in 1845 by John O'Sullivan: "Manifest Destiny".

The Israeli version of "Manifest Destiny" is Moshe Dayan's slogan "We are fated". Dayan, a typical representative of the second generation, made two important speeches in his life. The first and better known was delivered in 1956 at the grave of Roy Rutenberg of Nahal Oz, a kibbutz facing Gaza: "Before their [the Palestinians in Gaza] very eyes we turn into our homestead the land and villages in which they and their forefathers have lived ... This is the fate of our generation, the choice of our life - to be prepared and armed, strong and tough - or otherwise, the sword will slip from our fist, and our life will be snuffed out."

He did not mean only his own generation. The second, lesser known speech is more important. It was delivered in August 1968, after the occupation of the Golan Heights, before a rally of young Kibbutzniks. When I asked him about it in the Knesset, he inserted the entire speech into the Knesset record, a very unusual procedure in our parliament.

This is what he told the youth: "We are fated to live in a permanent state of fighting against the Arabs ... For the hundred years of the Return to Zion we are working for two things: the building of the land and the building of the people ... That is a process of expansion, of more Jews and more settlements ... That is a process that has not reached the end. We were born here and found our parents, who had come here before us ... It is not your duty to reach the end. Your duty is to add your layer ... to expand the settlement to the best of your ability, during your lifetime ... (and) not to say: this is the end, up to here, we have finished."

Dayan, who was well versed in the ancient texts, probably had in mind the phrase in the Chapter of the Fathers (a part of the Mishnah, which was finished 1800 years ago and formed the basis of the Talmud): "It is not up to you to finish the work, and you are not free to stop doing it."

That is the hidden agenda. We must haul it up from the depths of our unconscious minds to the realm of consciousness in order to face it, to reveal the terrible danger inherent in it, the danger of an eternal war which may in the fullness of time lead this state to disaster.

Approaching the 60th anniversary of the state, we must draw a line under this chapter of our history, exorcise the dybbuk and say clearly: yes, we have ended the chapter of expansion and settlement.

This will enable us to change the course of the river. To put an end to the occupation. To dismantle the settlements. To make peace. To effect a reconciliation with the neighboring people. To turn Israel into a peaceful, democratic, secular and liberal state, that can devote all its resources to the creation of a flourishing, modern society.

And first of all: to agree on a border.

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