

On the Road to Civil War

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Everybody in Israel is talking about the Next War. The most popular TV channel is running a whole series about it.

Not another war with the Arabs. Not the nuclear threat from Iran. Not the ongoing bloody confrontation with the Palestinians.

The talk is about the coming civil war.

Only a few months ago, that would have sounded preposterous. Now, suddenly, it has become a possibility, and a very real one. Not another blown-up media sensation. Not yet another of Sharon's political manipulations. Not just a new blackmail attempt by the settlers. But the real thing on the ground.

They talk about it at cabinet meetings and in the Knesset, on TV talk-shows, in editorials and the news pages. The Chief-of-Staff has publicly warned that the army may fall apart. One of the ministers says that the very existence of the State of Israel is in danger. Another minister prophesies a bloodbath like the Spanish civil war.

Quietly and not so quietly, the Shin Bet is taking precautions. The prison service has been ordered to prepare facilities for mass detentions. The army leadership is planning the call-up of 10 thousand reserve soldiers and starting to think about the steps they must take in the case of...

No, it's a very real threat.

On the face of it, it may seem to have appeared from nowhere. But whoever has eyes to see knew that it is going to happen, sooner or later.

The seeds of the civil war were sown when the first settlement was put up in the occupied territories. At the time, I told the Prime Minister in the Knesset: "You are laying a land mine. Some day you will have to dismantle it. As a former soldier, let me warn you that the dismantling of land mines is a very unpleasant job."

Since then, hundreds of mines have been laid. The minefields are being extended even now.

The process was led by religious cranks. Their declared aim, as they said then and never tire of repeating, is to drive all the Arabs out of the country that God promised us. And the land God promised us, as one of them reminded us on TV the other day, is not the "Palestine" of the British mandate, but the Promised Land – including Jordan, Lebanon and parts of Syria and Sinai. Quoting the Bible, another one declared that we have come to this country not only to inherit, but also to disinherit the others, to drive them out and take their place.

Since the then Minister of Defence, Shimon Peres, implanted the first settlement, Kedumim, in the middle of the Palestinian population on the West Bank, the settlements have spread like locusts. Every settlement has gradually stolen the lands and water of the neighboring Palestinian villages, uprooted their trees, blocked their roads and built new roads, barred to Palestinians. Almost all the settlements have spawned satellite outposts on the nearby hills.

This is continuing at this very moment. After Sharon solemnly promised President Bush to dismantle some of the “outposts”, dozens of new one have sprung up. All the ministries are actively helping the outposts that were officially defined as “illegal”. Not only is the army defending them, thereby putting its soldiers in harm’s way, but it is actually telling the “hill-boys” where to set up their outposts and secretly advising them how to go about it.

When we warned of the danger, we were told to relax. Only a small minority of the settlers, we were comforted, are fanatical freaks. These are indeed crazy and will forcibly resist any attempt to remove them. But that will not be a big problem, because the vast majority of Israeli citizens detest them and consider them a sect of crackpots.

Most of the settlers, we were told, are not fanatics. They went there because the government presented them with expensive villas, which they could not even dream about in Israel proper. They were looking for “quality of life”. When the government tells them to move, they will take the compensation and move on.

That is, of course, a dangerous delusion. As Karl Marx observed, people’s consciousness is determined by their situation. The good Laborites who were implanted by the Labor government on the West Bank and in the Gaza Strip now talk and behave like the worst followers of the late fascist rabbi Meir Kahane.

Moreover, we were told, even the weirdos recognize Israeli democracy. Nobody will raise his hands against soldiers of the Israeli army. When the government and the Knesset decide to evacuate settlements, they will obey. They may raise a ruckus and put up a show of resistance, as they did during the evacuation of the North Sinai settlements in 1982, but at the end of the day they will give in. After all, even in North Sinai not one single settler refused, in the end, to accept their compensation.

But this disdain for the settlers is no less dangerous than the disdain for the Arabs. What had been hidden all the time is now becoming clear: the settlers don’t give a damn for democracy and the institutions of the state. Their hard core spells it out: when the resolutions of the Knesset contradict the Halakha (Jewish religious law), the Halakha has priority. After all, the Knesset is just a gang of corrupt politicians. And what value have the secular laws, copied from the Goyim (Gentiles), compared to the word of God, blessed be his name?

Many settlers do not yet say so openly and pretend to be insulted when such attitudes are attributed to them, but in fact they are dragged along by the hard core that has already thrown off all the masks. They challenge not only the policy of the government, but Israeli democracy as such. They declare openly that their aim is to overthrow the State of Law and put in its place the State of the Halakha.

A State of Law is subject to the will of the majority, which enacts the laws and amends them as necessary. The State of the Halakha is subject to the Torah, revealed once and for all on Mount Sinai and unchangeable. Only a very small number of eminent rabbis have the

authority to interpret the Halakha. That is, of course, the opposite of democracy. In any other country, these people would be called fascists. The religious coloration makes no difference.

The religious-rightist rebels are powerfully motivated. Many of them believe in the Kabbala – not Madonna’s fashionable Kabbala, but the real one, which says that today’s secular Jews are really Amalekites who succeeded in infiltrating the People of Israel at the time of the exodus from Egypt. God Himself has commanded, as everyone knows, the eradication of Amalek from the face of the earth. Can there be a more perfect ideological basis for civil war?

Why has this become a threat at this point in time? It is not yet clear whether Sharon really intends to dismantle the few settlements in the Gaza Strip. But as the settlers see it, even the idea of removing one single settlement is a *casus belli*. It attacks everything that is holy to them. Sharon tried to convince them that it is only a ploy – to sacrifice a few small settlements in order to save all the others. In vain.

In preparation for the Great Rebellion, the settlers have unveiled their potential. The most eminent rabbis of the “Religious Zionist movement” have declared that the evacuation of a settlement is a sin against God and have called upon the soldiers to refuse orders. Hundreds of rabbis, including the rabbis of the settlements and the rabbis of the religious units in the army have joined the call.

The voice of the few opponents is being drowned out. They quote the Talmudic saying “the law of the kingdom is law”, meaning that every government has to be obeyed, much as Christians are required to render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s, etc. But who listens to these “moderate rabbis” now?

The conquest of the army from the inside began long ago. The “arrangement” with the yeshivot (religious schools), that serve in the army as separate units, has allowed the entry of a huge Trojan horse. In any confrontation between their rabbis and their army commanders, the soldiers of the “arrangement yeshivot” will obey the rabbis. Worse: for years now, the settlers have systematically penetrated the ranks of the officers’ corps, where they now constitute an even more dangerous Trojan horse.

The right-wing refusal to obey orders is unlike the left-wing conscientious objection. The leftist refusal is a personal stand, the rightist refusal a collective mutiny. On the left, a few hundred refused to serve the occupation, on the right, many thousands, even tens of thousands, will obey their rabbis’ orders to refuse. As the Chief-of-Staff has warned, the army may disintegrate.

Altogether, the settlers, together with their close allies in Israel including the yeshivot students, may amount to something like half a million people – a mighty phalanx for rebellion.

As of now, the settlers are only using this threat as an instrument for blackmail and deterrence, in order to choke off any thought of evacuating settlements and territories. But if the blackmail does not do the job, the Great Rebellion is just a matter of time.

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