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Hatred Just Grows and Grows

By *Uri Avnery*
July 10, 2016

A Palestinian youngster breaks into a settlement, enters the nearest house, stabs a 13-year old girl in her sleep and is killed.

Three Israeli men kidnap a 12-year old Palestinian boy at random, take him to an open field and burn him alive.

Two Palestinians from a small town near Hebron enter Israel illegally, have coffee in a Tel Aviv amusement quarter and then shoot up everybody around before they are captured. They become national heroes.

An Israeli soldier sees a severely wounded Palestinian attacker lying on the ground, approaches him and shoots him in the head at point blank range. He is applauded by most Israelis.

These are not "normal" actions even in a guerrilla war. They are the manifestations of bottomless hatred, a hatred so terrible that it overcomes all norms of humanity.

This was not always so. A few days after the 1967 war, in which Israel conquered East Jerusalem, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, I traveled alone through the newly occupied territories. I was welcomed almost everywhere, people were eager to sell me their goods, tell me their stories. They were curious about the Israelis, much as we were curious about them.

At the time, Palestinians did not dream of an eternal occupation. They hated the Jordanian rulers and were glad that we had driven them out. They believed that we would leave soon, allowing them to rule themselves at long last.

In Israel, everyone spoke about a "benevolent occupation". The first military governor was a very humane person, Chaim Herzog, a future President of Israel and the father of the present chairman of the Labor Party.

Within a few years, all this had changed. The Palestinians realized that the Israelis did not intend to leave, but that they were about to steal their land, quite literally, and cover it with their settlements.

(Something similar happened 15 years later in South Lebanon. The Shiite population greeted our troops with flowers and rice, believing that we would drive the Palestinians out and leave. When we didn't, they turned into determined guerrilla fighters and eventually founded Hezbollah.)

By now, hatred is everywhere. Arabs and Israelis use different highways, but it is far worse than South African apartheid, because the whites there had no interest in driving the blacks out. It is also far worse than most forms of colonialism, because the imperial powers did not generally pull the land out from under the feet of the natives in order to settle there.

Nowadays, mutual hatred reigns supreme. The settlers terrorize their Arab neighbors, Arab boys throw rocks and improvised fire-bombs at passing Jewish cars on the highroads where they themselves are not allowed to drive. Recently, the car of a high-ranking army officer was stoned. He got out, pursued a boy who was running away, shot him in the back and killed him – in flagrant violation of army rules for opening fire.

Today, some 120 years after the beginning of the Zionist experiment, the hatred between the two peoples is abysmal. The conflict dominates our lives. More than half of all news stories in the media concern this conflict.

If the founder of modern Zionism, the Viennese journalist Theodor Herzl, were to come to life again, he would be totally shocked. In the futuristic novel he wrote in German at the beginning of last century, called *Altneuland* ("Old-new Land"), he described in detail life in the future Jewish State. Its Arab inhabitants are portrayed as happy and patriotic citizens, grateful for all the progress and advantages brought by the Zionists.

In the beginning of the Jewish immigration, the Arabs were indeed remarkably acquiescent. Perhaps they believed that the Zionists were a new version of the German religious immigrants who had arrived a few decades earlier and indeed brought progress to the country. These Germans, who called themselves Templars (no connection with the medieval crusader group so called) had no political ambitions. They set up model villages and urban neighborhoods and lived happily ever after, until the German Nazis infected them. At the outbreak of World War II the British deported them all to faraway Australia.

The model village these Templars built near Jaffa, Sarona, is now an amusement park in Tel Aviv – the very place where the latest terrorist outrage took place.

When the Arabs realized that the new Zionist immigrants were not a repeat of the Templars, but a new aggressive colonialist implantation, conflict became inevitable. It grows worse from year to year. The hatred between the two peoples seems to reach new heights all the time.

By now, the two peoples seem to live in two different worlds. A centuries-old Arab village and a new Israeli settlement, situated one mile apart, might just as well exist on two different planets.

From their first day on earth, children of the two peoples hear totally different stories from their parents. This goes on in school. By the time they are grown up, they have very few perceptions in common.

For a young Palestinian, the story is quite simple. This was an Arab land for more than 14 centuries, a part of Arab civilization. For some, their ownership of the country goes back thousands of years, since Islam did not displace the existing Christian population when it conquered Palestine. Islam was at the time a much more progressive religion, so local Christians gradually adopted Islam, too.

In the Palestinian view, Jews ruled Palestine in antiquity for a few decades only. The Jewish claim to the country now, based on a promise given to them by their own private Jewish God, is a blatant colonialist ploy. The Zionists came to the country in the 20th century as allies of the British imperialist power, without any right to it.

Most Palestinians are now ready to make peace and even to live in a reduced Palestinian state side by side with Israel, but are rebuffed by the Israeli government, which wants to keep "all of Eretz Israel" for Jewish colonization, leaving only some disconnected enclaves to the Palestinians.

A Palestinian Arab who believes that this is a self-evident truth may live a few hundred yards away from a Jewish Israeli, who believes that this is all a pack of lies, invented by Arab anti-Semites (an oxymoron) in order to drive the Jews into the sea. Every Jewish child in Israel learns from an early age that this land was given by God to the Jews, who ruled it for many centuries, until they offended God and He drove them out as a temporary punishment. Now the Jews have come back to their country, which was occupied by a foreign people which came from Arabia. These people now have the cheek to claim the country as their own.

This being so, official Israeli doctrine says, there is no solution. We just have to be ready for a very very long time – practically for eternity – to defend ourselves and our country. Peace is a dangerous illusion.

The naïve vision of Herzl was opposed by the right-wing Zionist leader Vladimir (Ze'ev) Jabotinsky. He stated – quite rightly – that nowhere in the world has a native people ever give up its land peacefully to a foreigner. Therefore, he said, we have to build an "iron wall" to defend our new settlement in the country of our forebears.

Jabotinsky, who had studied in the liberal post-Risorgimento Italy, had a liberal world-view. His present-day followers are Binyamin Netanyahu and the Likud party, who are anything but liberal.

They would applaud wildly if God made all Palestinians disappear overnight from "our" country. They might even consider helping God a little bit.

Indeed, God plays an ever growing role in the conflict.

In the beginning, God played a very minor role. Almost all first-generation Zionists, including both Herzl and Jabotinsky, were staunch atheists. It was said that Zionists were people who did not believe in God, but who believed that God had promised us the country.

This has radically changed – on both sides.

In the beginning of the conflict, early last century, the entire Arab world was infected with European-style nationalism. Islam was always there, but it was not the driving force. Arab national heroes, like Gamal Abd-al-Nasser, were avid nationalists, who promised to unify the Arabs and turn them into a world power.

Arab nationalism failed miserably. Communism never took root in the Islamic countries. Political Islam, which was victorious against the Soviets in Afghanistan, is gaining ground throughout the Arab world.

Curiously enough, the same happened in Israel. After the 1967 war, in which Israel completed its conquest of the Holy Land, and especially the Temple Mount and the Western Wall, atheist Zionism steadily lost ground, and a violent religious kind of Zionism took over.

In the Semitic world, the European idea of separation between state and church never really took root. In both Islam and Judaism, religion and State are inseparable.

In Israel, power is now wielded by a government dominated by the extreme ideology of the religious right-wing, while the "secular" left-wing has long been in full retreat.

In the Arab world, the same is happening – only more so. Al-Qaeda, Daesh and their ilk are gaining everywhere. In Egypt and other places, military dictatorships try to stop this process, but their foundations are shaky.

Some of us Israeli atheists have been warning of this danger for decades. We said that nationalist states can reach compromise and make peace, while for religious movements this is almost impossible.

Secular rulers can be assassinated, like Muammar Gaddafi in Libya and Yitzhak Rabin in Israel. Religious movements live on when this happens to their leaders.

(Assassin is a corruption of the Arab Word Hashisheen. The 12th century founder of this sect, the Old Man of the Mountain, used to feed his emissaries with Hashish and send them on incredibly daring missions. The great Salah-ad-Din (Saladin) once woke up in his bed to find a dagger next to him – and hastened to make a deal with the leader of the Assassins.)

I am convinced that it is in the vital interest of Israel to make peace with the Palestinian people, and with the Arab world at large, before this dangerous infection engulfs the entire Arab – and Muslim – world.

The leaders of the Palestinian people, both in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, are still comparatively moderate people. This is true even for Hamas, a religious movement.

I would suggest that for the West in general, supporting peace in our region is also of paramount importance. The convulsions now affecting several Arab countries do not bode well for them, either.

Reading a document like this week's Quartet report on the Middle East, I am amazed by their self-destructive cynicism. This ridiculous document of the Quartet, composed of the US, Europe, Russia and the UN, is intent on creating an equilibrium – equally blaming the conqueror and the conquered, the oppressor and the oppressed, ignoring the occupation altogether. Verily, a masterpiece of hypocrisy, a.k.a. diplomacy.

Absent all chances for a serious effort for peace, hatred will just grow and grow, until it engulfs us all.

Unless we take action to stem it in time.