

THE GREEN LINE IS NOT SACRED

Uri Avnery Feb 14, 2017

Settlers are trying to conceal the differences between them and us Israelis to eradicate the 1967 border and have Israel annex all the occupied territories.

The most profound analysis about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that I ever read was written by the English-Polish-Jewish historian Isaac Deutscher. The entire analysis is based on a single image – of a man living on the top story of a building that catches fire. To save his own life, he jumps out of the window and lands on a passer-by. The victim is badly hurt and becomes crippled, and the two become embroiled in a never-ending conflict.

Naturally, no image, not even Deutscher's, can be completely accurate. Zionists didn't land in Israel by happenstance but because of the Bible. The founder of the Zionist movement, Benjamin Zeev Herzl, actually preferred Argentina as a site for the homeland. But the image is essentially a good metaphor, at least regarding developments until 1967. From there, the settlers went on beyond the Green Line, the border until that time – although the building wasn't on fire any longer.

There is nothing sacred about the Green Line. It's no different from any other border in the world, whatever its metaphoric color may be. Most borders are created by geography or the happenstance of war. Two people fight over one territory until at some point, they have had enough and make peace. That is how a boundary is born.

Israel's terrestrial boundary, that "Green Line," was also set by happenstance, following war. Part of the line was demarcated in the agreement between the then-new Israeli government and the first King Abdullah of Jordan, who gave us the towns in the "triangle" as baksheesh in exchange for Israel's acquiescence to Jordan's annexation of the West Bank. What's so sacred about that boundary? Nothing, beyond its mere existence.

True, the United Nations, in its historic resolution in November 29, 1947, determined that two nations would arise in this land, a Jewish one and an Arab one, and it also laid down the border between them. The Arabs embarked on war against this resolution, and Israel took advantage of situation to expand its territory. The War of Independence in 1948 ended without a peace agreement. The cease-fire lines determined at the war's end were accepted by the world as the border of the new state. In the 68 years since, that has not changed.

This is the situation, in theory and in practice. Israeli law only applies within the Green Line. All the rest is occupied territories, which is governed by military law. Two small areas, East Jerusalem and the Golan Heights, were unilaterally annexed to Israel – a status that remains unrecognized by the other nations of the world.

I am taking the trouble to present this history because the settlers in the occupied territories have lately begun to mock their critics in Israel: "Hey, what's the big difference between you and us? You're also living on Arab land. Who are you to sniff

at us? You did the same thing we're doing. The only difference is that you did it before 1967 and we're doing it now.”

Here is the difference: We live in a country recognized by most of the rest of the world. The settlers live on land that the rest of the world sees as occupied Palestinian territories.

Take Texas: The United States wrested it from Mexico by war. But if Donald Trump invades Mexico today and seizes another chunk of land, annexing it to the U.S., the status of that land would be completely different from Texas’.

Benjamin Netanyahu, whom some are already calling Trumpiyahu, supports the settlements with all his heart. Earlier this month he caved in under the pressure of the High Court of Justice and put on a show of evicting the settlers inhabiting one tiny illegal outpost, Amona, featuring much heartbreak and sobbing. The prime minister then immediately vowed to build thousands more housing units in the occupied territories.

The settlers are trying hard to conceal the differences between them and us, and not for the sake of justifying themselves. Their purpose is to eradicate the Green Line and have Israel annex all the occupied territories so Israel stretches from the sea to the Jordan River.

In recent years a global movement has arisen, calling for a boycott of all Israel. I have a problem with that movement. Gush Shalom, the movement to which I belong, is proud of the fact that years ago, we were first to boycott products made in the settlements. We still maintain that boycott, though now it's against Israeli law. But we never declared a boycott of the State of Israel, only, and always, against the settlements.

The main goal of our boycott is to teach Israelis what the difference is between themselves and the settlers. We published and distributed a detailed list of all the companies and products manufactured beyond the Green Line.

The boycott, divestment and sanctions movement achieves the exact opposite: When BDS says there is no difference between Israeli citizens inside the Green Line and the ones in the territories – it pushes innocent Israelis into the arms of the settlers. The settlers would doubtless love to get help from BDS in getting rid of that Green Line.

Israel isn't going to disappear. Neither are the Palestinians. If we agree on those two facts, then we can also agree to boycott products made in the settlements, and the settlements alone.

WHO REALLY STARTED THE 1948 WAR AND WHEN

Uri Avnery Feb 23, 2017

Relatively few Arabs remained within Israel's post-1948 borders, but the fact that no Jews remained in the territories conquered by the Arabs has been forgotten.

In the wake of my last op-ed in Haaretz (“The Green Line is not sacred,” Feb. 15), in which I noted that the Arabs launched the 1948 war after the United Nations adopted the Partition Plan for Palestine, I received some angry responses from readers. They argued that the Zionists started the war, with the intention of driving out the Palestinian population. Since I participated in the events – I was 24 at the time – and wrote two books about the war, one during the war itself and one immediately afterward (published in English in a single volume, as “1948. A Soldier’s Tale – The Bloody Road to Jerusalem”), I feel it my duty to describe what really happened, insofar as possible.

To describe the atmosphere before the war, I will relate one of the greatest experiences of my life. At the end of the summer of 1947, the annual folk dance festival was held in a natural amphitheater on the Carmel mountain chain. About 40,000 young people were there, a large number considering that the entire Yishuv, the Jewish community in Palestine, numbered around 635,000. A delegation from the UN Special Committee on Palestine, which had been appointed a few months earlier to find a solution to the Israeli-Arab conflict, was traveling around Palestine. We watched the troupes, including one from an adjacent Arab community, dance the debka with such verve that it could barely be induced to leave the stage, when it was announced over the loudspeakers that members of UNSCOP had come to visit. Spontaneously, all those thousands rose to their feet and sang “Hatikva,” the national anthem, with such enthusiasm that the song rang among the hills. It was the last time our generation was to convene. Within a year, thousands of them were dead.

Following the UNSCOP recommendations, on November 29 of that year the UN General Assembly approved a plan to create independent Jewish and Arab states, with Jerusalem to remain a separate entity, under UN control. Although the area designated for the Jewish state was small, the Jews realized that independence was the most important thing. It was one of the lessons of the Holocaust, which had ended just three years earlier. On the other hand, the entire Arab world objected to the solution. Why, it asked, should the people of Palestine pay the price for the Holocaust that had been perpetrated by peoples of Europe?

A few days after the UN resolution was passed, shots were fired at a Jewish bus. That is how the first stage of the war began.

To understand the events, the situation bears describing. The two populations in Israel were geographically intertwined. Jerusalem, Haifa and Tel Aviv had Jewish and Arab neighborhoods next to one another, within touching range. Practically every Jewish village was surrounded by Arab villages. Their existence depended on roads that were controlled by Arab villages. After the UN resolution, gunfire erupted throughout the land. True, formally the British still controlled it, but they endeavored not to get involved.

The Haganah Jewish militia, which was still underground, got Jewish traffic moving, in convoys that were commanded by the organization’s young men and women.

The women were especially important, because they could conceal weapons in their clothes.

On the Arab side, on the other hand, there was no central command. The attacks were being perpetrated by villagers, often armed with old rifles. Since some of these villagers were primitive, there were atrocities. Our side responded in the same coin, and thus the confrontation became more vicious. A group of 35 Haganah fighters, most of them students at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, was ambushed on the way to delivering supplies on foot to the four besieged kibbutzim of the Etzion Bloc, south of Jerusalem. All of them were slaughtered. We saw photographs showing their severed heads being paraded through the Old City of Jerusalem.

The inevitable strategy of the Jewish side was to expel the Arabs from around the roads. The Jewish communities were ordered to stay put, at any cost. Only a handful of isolated settlements were evacuated. In February 1948, the British withdrew from the area of Tel Aviv, which became the core of the Jewish state. At the same time, the British also withdrew from the Arab areas.

By late March, both sides were suffering terrible losses. On April 1, we received the order to scramble to Tel Aviv's makeshift port to receive a large shipment of Soviet arms. A year before, the Soviet bloc, in an astonishing turnabout, supported the Zionist side in the conflict. Joseph Stalin, who had been anti-Zionist, apparently decided that a Jewish state in Israel would be better for him than an American-British base.

We spent the day cleaning off the grease in which the rifles and submachine guns had been packed. They had been manufactured in Czechoslovakia for Adolf Hitler's army (but arrived too late for World War II). Thus the second phase of the war began.

Jerusalem's Jewish neighborhoods were separated from the rest of the Yishuv by the Arab villages that controlled the road. The aim of the war's first big campaign, Operation Nahshon, was to regain control. For several kilometers, the road traversed a narrow pass between steep hills. Bab al-Wad (Sha'ar Hagai) terrified all our soldiers. When we were shot at from above, we had to get out of our vehicles, climb the hillsides under fire and fight on the slopes. Not a cheery prospect.

A huge convoy, with 135 trucks and cars, came together, and we were assigned to bring it to Jerusalem. My squad got a truck loaded with crates of cheese. We tried to shelter between the crates. Happily, we were not attacked. We entered Jerusalem at midday on Shabbat, and were greeted by hordes of religious Jews who came out of the synagogues to welcome us with fervor. It was like Charles de Gaulle entering Paris during World War II. We returned to the coastal plain without trouble, but our convoy was the last one that got through to Jerusalem safely. The next was attacked and had to turn around.

In subsequent battles to open the road, the Yishuv failed and suffered terrible losses, especially at Latrun, where the road was held by irregular foreign Arab forces. The fighters of the Palmach, the elite strike force of the Haganah, found an alternative

route. We dubbed it the “Burma Road,” after the road the British took from India to China during World War II.

By then it was already obvious that the armies of the surrounding Arab states were poised to join the war. That awareness changed the nature of the warfare completely. In preparation for the anticipated battles, the Jewish army “cleansed” large areas of its Arab population, in order not to leave concentrations of Arab civilians behind our lines. It could be justified on tactical grounds.

The last of the British left on May 14. The following day, the armies of five Arab nations – Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and Iraq – joined the war, with some assistance from Saudi Arabia. These were standing armies trained by their previous colonial masters, Britain and France, who also supplied them with planes and cannons. We had none of those.

On paper, the Arab side had a tremendous advantage in arms, training and numbers, but we had three big advantages.

-First of all, we knew we were fighting for our lives and the lives of our families, exactly that, with our backs to the wall.

-Second, we had a unified command, while the Arab forces competed with each other.

-Third, the Arabs were contemptuous of us. Who ever heard of fighting Jews? And we had a certain tactical advantage by being inside the lines – we could move forces from one front to another quickly.

The weeks to come, the war’s third phase, brought its most desperate battles. Some of them recalled those of World War I. In the battle for Ibadis, near Kibbutz Negba in the Negev, I saw almost all our fighters die or get shot and only one heavy gun still fired. There were hours in which all seemed lost. But then, slowly, our luck began to change. As this phase drew to a close, we were still on our feet.

The fourth phase also saw hard battles, even one with bayonets. But we smelled victory. This was the stage of mass expulsions of Arabs from the cities and villages. It was clear that this was an intentional policy by the Jewish leadership. At this point I was badly wounded and quit the front lines.

When both sides were completely exhausted, the war ended with a series of cease-fire agreements and the Green Line – the 1949 Armistice Line marking Israel’s de facto borders – was created.

A small number of Arabs remained within these borders, but the forgotten fact is that not one single Jew remained in the territories conquered by the Arab side. Luckily for us, these territories were small relative to the territories conquered by our side. Both sides engaged in ethnic cleansing before the term had been coined.

Those are the facts. Anybody can build on them interpretations and ideologies as he sees fit. But, without Trumpian “alternative facts,” please.