

Children of Stones by Uri Avnery

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FOR GOD'S SAKE, are they crazy?

They congregate in the marketplace, boys of 15, 16 years, take stones and throw them at our soldiers, who are armed to the teeth. The soldiers shoot, sometimes over their heads, sometimes straight at them. Every day there are wounded, every few days there are dead.

What for? They do not have the slightest chance of changing the policy of the Israeli occupation. Only very rarely do the boys hit a soldier and cause him a slight injury.

Yet they go on. Why?

A FRIEND of mine sent me an article by a respected Palestinian. He described his first demonstration, many years ago.

The way he tells it, he was 15 years old, living in a village under occupation, hating Israeli soldiers. With a group of friends of the same age, he went to the center of his village, where a line of soldiers was waiting for them.

Each of the demonstrators picked up a stone – no lack of stones in an Arab village – and threw it at the soldiers. The stones fell far short, causing no harm.

But – and here the adult man grew ecstatic – what a wonderful feeling! For the first time in his life the boy felt that he was hitting back! He was no longer a despised, helpless Palestinian! He was upholding the dignity of his people! The old leaders may be subservient! Not he, not his friends!

For the first time in his life he was proud, proud to be a Palestinian, proud to be a courageous human being.

What a wonderful feeling! For this feeling he was ready to risk his life, again and again, ready to become a Shaheed, a witness, a martyr.

There are many thousands like him.

READING THIS description was exciting, because it reminded me of something in my own remote youth. When I was exactly the same age, 15.

It was in May, 1939. The British rulers of Palestine had just published a White Paper, putting the dampers on our Zionist vision. The world war was drawing close, and the British Empire needed the support of the Arab world.

A few months earlier, I had joined the National Military Organization (commonly called the Irgun), the most militant underground organization devoted to the fight against the British colonial regime. The last push for me was a disturbing event: for the first time the British had hanged a Jewish "terrorist". I was determined to fill his place.

In the evening I received an order: tomorrow noon we shall start a demonstration against the White Paper. Be ready in Allenby street, near the Mugrabi cinema.

Long before the time, I was there, waiting with growing excitement. At noon exactly, a bugle sounded. I ran to the assembly point, together with hundreds of other Irgun members. Repeating slogans that someone shouted, we started to march along the street, then Tel Aviv's main thoroughfare.

Halfway down the street there stands the Great Synagogue, with its external staircase. Somebody ran up it and delivered an impassioned speech, ending with the Biblical verse "If I forget thee, oh Jerusalem / May my right hand wither…"

From there we marched to our destination: the district offices of the British administration. Some daring fellows ran up, broke open the doors and started to throw down heaps of official papers. We burned them in the street.

Suddenly British soldiers appeared on the scene. Shots were fired, either over our heads or at us. It was the first time in my life I was shot at.

We ran away, through a hole in the fence by the railway line. After a few hundred meters we found each other again. We were ecstatic, happy beyond measure. We had shown those bloody British that Jews can fight back. We had risked our lives for our fatherland. We had made our people proud of us.

That was 79 years ago. I remember it as if it were yesterday. And I completely understand the ecstasy of the Palestinian boys, the "children of the stones", who today risk their lives, throwing stones in futile demonstrations.

OUR LEADERS treat the children-of-the-stones with disdain, much as the British authorities treated us then. What can they achieve? Nothing. Our – and their – pitiful demonstrations were/are ridiculous.

But a boy of 15 is a powerful force. His pride in fighting back grows with the years. It is a force that cannot be subdued. The more of them are killed, the stronger they get. The heavier the hand of the oppressor, the stronger the determination of the oppressed. It's a law of nature.

In today's Hebrew Empire, from the Mediterranean Sea to the Jordan River, there is already a slight Palestinian majority – something like 8.2 million Arabs to 7.8 million Jews. This fact is generally hidden in official statistics. Since the Palestinian birthrate is much higher than the Jewish one (except for Orthodox Jews), the Arab majority will inexorably grow. Greater Israel will become more and more an apartheid state.

What is the answer of the Israeli Right to this? There is no answer. Some on the fringes dream of a mass exodus of the Arabs, like the one of 1948. But no people makes the same mistake twice. Whatever happens, the Palestinians will cling to their soil. They call this steadfastness "sumud".

I have in my head a poem by one of our national poets from before 1948: "No people retreats from the bulwarks of its life." The Palestinians are like all other peoples. Like us.

LATELY, A NEW political fashion has emerged, especially among Arabs. They declare that there is only one choice: either Two States or One State. If the Israeli leadership, aided and abetted by President Trump, rejects the Two State solution, the One State solution will take its place. Jews and Arabs will live in one joint state, from the sea to the river. End of the Zionist dream.

This is nonsense. If some Arab politicians think that this prospect will frighten Israelis into accepting the Two State solution, they are sadly mistaken. True, some right-wing Israelis talk about this possibility, but they know that this would be hell.

One State? What would the army look like? Who would command it, who would be the soldiers? With an Arab majority in the Knesset (which would presumably change its name to Majlis) fighting a daily battle against the Jewish factions? With the standard of living of the Jews vastly higher than that of the Arab citizens? Who will control the police? Endless questions without answers.

The simple fact is that there is no choice between a Two State and a One State solution, because One State is no solution at all, but a pipe-dream. Or a nightmare.

So is there no choice? Of course there is. There always is.

The choice is between the Two State solution and No Solution. Eternal war.