

The Israel and UAE peace deal: The honey and the thorn

by Kenneth Hanson



Israel's celebrated songstress and unofficial poet laureate, who authored the classic melody "Jerusalem of Gold," the late Naomi Shemer, subsequently wrote a far more melancholy tune called "The Honey and the Thorn." It describes the heartbreak of the Jewish settlers in the Israeli town of Yamit, on the

Egyptian border, who (in 1982) were forcibly dragged from their homes by the Israel Defense Force, as part of the “land for peace” deal that brought about the formal recognition of the Jewish state by Anwar Sadat’s Egypt back in 1979. The homes themselves were then bulldozed to the ground. For Jews living in their own ancient homeland (“the Land of Milk and Honey”), it seems that a thorn always accompanies whatever honey may be found. With last week’s decision by the United Arab Emirates to recognize the Jewish state, a new day has apparently dawned. At last, rather than “land for peace,” we have a classic, Trump-negotiated deal, involving “peace for peace.” None of Israel’s land is on the chopping block. There will be no newly minted Jewish refugees, requiring resettlement within the 1949 armistice lines.

This does not mean, however, that there are no caveats. Earlier this year, Trump’s “deal of the century” for Middle East peace involved the extension of Israeli sovereignty over the Jewish settlement blocks in Judea and Samaria, the heartland of biblical Israel, nowadays incorrectly dubbed the “West Bank” (of the Jordan River). That alone was cause for huge celebration among the half million Jewish settlers who have taken up residence in areas conquered (some would say “liberated”) from Jordanian rule in the 1967 Six Day War. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who was forced to join a coalition government with opposition leader Benny Gantz, even set a date, July 1, for the implementation of the sovereignty (dubiously called “annexation”) plan. Obviously, that never happened. Instead, the new deal with the UAE, calls for the “suspension” of Israel’s sovereignty over half a million of its own citizens. During Trump’s official White House announcement of the deal, U.S. ambassador to Israel, David Friedman, was careful to say that Israel’s sovereignty over these territories has only been “suspended,” not irrevocably terminated. Trump, however, pointedly declared that it is “off the table” – period. Therein lies the thorn.

Back in Jerusalem, the co-leader of the New Right party, Ayelet Shaked, appeared on Israel news to celebrate the “honey” of what could be a truly game-changing shift across the entire Middle East. Indeed, the UAE is likely to be the first of what will hopefully be multiple additional Arab states recognizing Israel as an ally against the radical Iranian regime. However, she equally lamented the “thorn” – the permanent loss of Jewish sovereignty over Jewish land. What about Ambassador Friedman’s assertion that the “suspension” allows the matter to be revisited in the future? Shaked called this an “illusion.” The time for Israel to make a bold move and extend sovereignty over the settlement blocks was earlier this year, but as soon as Bibi was forced into a power sharing coalition with Gantz, the dream became illusory. Sadly, the sovereignty train has left the station, and it’s not likely to return. To be sure, the state of Israel, as well as the entire free world, should be greatly encouraged by the “honey” of the last few days. A new horizon may well be visible in the war against terrorism, which is part of a larger war over the fate of civilization itself. But the thorn remains, deeply embedded in the souls of hundreds of thousands of Jews, who want nothing more than to be, in the words of the Israel national anthem, “a free people in our own land.”

First published in