

{AUGUST 7 2004}

SOME ORDER IN THE MESS

Ariel Sharon's "disengagement" plan has already made a mess on all levels. It has sparked a continuing cabinet crisis, an upheaval in several parties, a disorientation of public opinion, confusion in the security establishment and armed confrontations between Palestinian organizations.

The Israeli peace movement is mixed up like everybody else. Some support Sharon because of the plan and even want to join his government, others denounce Sharon and the plan furiously.

Let's try to make some sense of this mess.

1. What does the plan say?

According to Sharon, he plans to evacuate - and probably demolish - all settlements in the Gaza Strip, evacuate the settlers and the army and leave the territory to the Palestinians. According to the plan, the Israeli army will hold on to the "Philadelphi Axis" as an insurmountable barrier between the Strip and Egypt.

As a symbolic gesture, the plan also provides for the dismantling of three small, unimportant settlements on the northern edge of the West Bank.

2. Will it be implemented?

Not at all certain.

The plan was not the result of elaborate staff-work. It was more in the nature of an improvisation, quickly served up to please President Bush. Sharon knew that it would be opposed by the right-wing and the Palestinians, and pull the rug out from under the Labor Party.

The government has officially resolved to confirm the plan in principle, but has not decided to dismantle a single settlement. Such a decision would necessitate another government resolution.

In the meantime, the matter is moving forward languidly. The army is supposed to produce a plan, but insists that the job of removing the settlers should be turned over to the police. The Ministry of Justice has been charged with the drafting of the

necessary laws. A committee is supposed to prepare a sliding scale for compensation. The tempo of progress in no way indicates speedy implementation.

But, most importantly: there is no effort at all to mobilize public opinion in favor of the disengagement. The opponents of disengagement, the settlers and their allies, are working with great zeal. They have already won a victory in the referendum of Likud members, they have organized a big “human chain” demonstration, they are preparing further large actions. They manipulate the media with great dexterity. They can mobilize at a moment’s notice tens of thousands of settlers and right-wingers. They have at their disposal almost unlimited amounts of money, provided by American Jewish millionaires and Christian fundamentalists.

Opposing this propaganda juggernaut, there is nothing but silence. The Likud is not mobilizing its members for a campaign of support for the plan, the Labor party is busy with internal squabbles about joining the government and the left-wing does not know what to think about the whole affair.

The supporters of the plan console themselves with the knowledge that in all public opinion polls, a majority supports the plan. But this is a wobbly majority, unenthusiastic and unsure of itself. It has not yet been tested in a real crisis. It can easily evaporate.

3. Is there a time-table?

None at all.

Sharon and his people speak loosely about starting the evacuation in March, 2005, and finishing the job by the end of that year. By the look of things, this is idle talk. Since Yitzhak Rabin remarked that “there are no sacred dates”, all Israeli leaders have violated agreed timetables. The natural inclination is always to postpone difficult decisions.

When I met Yasser Arafat this morning, he remarked: “It took Israel six hours to leave South Lebanon, why does Sharon need 17 months to leave the Gaza Strip?”

4. So what is Sharon’s real purpose?

The plan suits his grand design to turn all (or almost all) of Eretz Israel into a Jewish State. (Eretz Israel - the Land of Israel - is nowadays understood as identical with Mandatory Palestine, the land between the Mediterranean and the Jordan.)

For him, Gaza, a negligible piece of real estate (less than 1.5 % of the country!) is devouring a disproportionate part of Israel’s military and financial resources. What is important for him is “Judea and Samaria” - the West Bank, which is 16 times larger. He hopes that the disengagement from Gaza will enable him to annex more than half of

the West Bank and to enclose the Palestinians in a number of enclaves that are practically isolated from each other and at the mercy of Israel. In the long run, the aim is to make life intolerable for the Palestinian population and cause it to leave altogether.

5. If so, is there any positive side to the disengagement plan?

In the peace camp, some voices insist that the plan should be supported because it creates, for the first time, a precedent of evacuating settlements in Eretz Israel. Emotionally and politically, this would certainly have a huge impact. (The Yamit area, where several settlements were evacuated in pursuance of the peace treaty with Egypt, is not considered part of Eretz Israel).

The peaceniks who support the plan argue that the long-term intentions of Sharon are irrelevant. The only important thing is what actually happens on the ground - and on the ground 7500 settlers will be removed from the Gaza Strip - if it happens, of course.

6. On the other side, can the plan cause damage?

A disengagement that is divorced from peace negotiations can be very dangerous.

Sharon's people say that they don't give a damn what will happen in the Gaza Strip after the Israeli withdrawal. They are pretending. Behind the scenes, the military and political leadership is planning the installation of a local warlord, who would rule the Strip under Israeli (and therefore also American and Egyptian) protection. Their preferred candidate is Muhammad Dahlan, the former boss of the political police in the Strip.

If this happens, the local strongman may well end up like Bashir Jumail, who was supposed to rule Lebanon under Israeli protection. He was soon murdered. The warlord installed by Israel may be removed and actual power in the Gaza Strip then pass into the hands of the armed organizations that will continue to fight against Israel by all available means, including missiles. The Israeli army will then occupy the territory again, and the whole story will begin again from square one.

On the other hand, if the experiment succeeds, the Gaza Strip will become an "autonomous" area under Israeli control, administered by a local strongman. It will be rather like the South African Bantustans at the time of apartheid. The Palestinian people will, of course, view this as an existential threat and fight against it by all possible means.

7. Can the plan be supported by the peace camp?

Only if the following conditions are met:

(One) The government of Israel must declare that the West Bank and the Gaza Strip constitute one single territorial unit, as explicitly stated in the Oslo agreement.

(Two) The disengagement must be connected with the renewal of peace negotiations between the government of Israel and the elected leadership of the Palestinian people.

(Three) The disengagement must be implemented by agreement with the Palestinian Authority and the territory must be turned over to it in an orderly manner. The agreement should include arrangements that will guarantee the security of both sides, perhaps backed by an international peacekeeping force.

(Four) The “Philadelphi Axis” must be dismantled. Land, air and sea connections between the Gaza Strip with the world must be opened, perhaps under international supervision.

(Five) All buildings and infrastructure of the settlements must be turned over intact to the Palestinian Authority or an international institution. Their value may be taken into account when the refugee problem is settled.

(Six) A definite timetable must be agreed for the implementation of all phases of the disengagement.

PS: When I asked Arafat today whether he believes that the disengagement plan will actually be implemented, he answered: “We hope so!”

“I didn’t ask whether you hope so, but whether you believe it!” I insisted.

Arafat smiled and repeated: “We hope so!”