

{DECEMBER 4 2004}

WIDOW OF OPPORTUNITY?

My immediate reaction to Marwan Barghouti's registration as a candidate for the presidency of the Palestinian Authority was positive.

First of all, I am always in favor of the underdog. And who could be more of an underdog than a prisoner?

Second, I respect the man. I have met him at planning meetings for joint peace actions. I have demonstrated for him in Tel-Aviv and been forcibly evicted from the court building, with a rightist lynch mob howling in the background.

Third, the Marwan Barghouti candidacy puts the fate of the Palestinian prisoners on the agenda - those prisoners of war who are treated like common criminals by Israel.

Fourth, his candidacy (if he exercises it) will set the stage for a scene unprecedented in the Arab world: an election where the victory of one candidate is no assured in advance. An Abu Mazen-Marwan Barghouti confrontation would be a real fight.

On second thoughts I took the opposite view.

The whole world is following these elections in order to see if the Palestinian people is capable of uniting in time of crisis, after the death of the Father of the Nation. In his 45 years as leader of the struggle for liberation, Yasser Arafat succeeded in maintaining the unity of his people, a well-nigh impossible task. Many have predicted that after his death the nation will break into a hundred splinters. The unity around Abu-Mazen has - at least until now - confounded these hopes (or fears.)

I am not a religious believer in "Unity". Debate and dispute are the lifeblood of democracy, and when the time comes, the Palestinians will have to debate thoroughly the future course of their struggle for liberation. But: is this the right time?

I think not. Disunity among the Palestinians at this moment will provide a pretext for the enemies of peace within the Israeli and American leaderships. They will exclaim with great joy: "See? There is no one to talk with!" It is important for the Palestinian people to show the world that there is indeed someone to talk with. And since both President Bush and his guide and mentor, Ariel Sharon, have already declared that

Abu Mazen is “moderate” and “pragmatic”, they will be hard put to go back to the mendacious slogan “We Have No Partner!” (Copyright: Ehud Barak.)

Therefore it is important that Abu Mazen be elected, and elected by a large majority.

He has to be given a chance. Not only he personally, but the whole approach he represents: the belief that without suicide attacks and the armed Intifada, the Palestinians can now achieve their minimal national goals: a Palestinian state in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, the Green Line border (with possible small exchanges of territory), Jerusalem as capital of the two states, evacuation of the settlements and an agreement on a practical solution to the refugee problem.

Perhaps that is a naive belief. Perhaps it has no chance at all, perhaps it is actually the Palestinians who “have no partner”. But it is important for the Palestinians - and the entire world - to put this belief to the test. After a year, by the end of 2005, it will be possible to draw conclusions - and then the time will be ripe for the great debate among the Palestinians. If Abu Mazen is able to show impressive achievements - he will win. If not, the Third Intifada will probably break out.

This Palestinian debate will be the great opportunity for Marwan Barghouti to take part and to present his own approach. Until then, I believe, he will be well advised to support Abu Mazen. After all, he himself thought so until this week.

Do the hopes of Abu Mazen have a real basis?

This week, the President of Egypt, Husni Mubarak, advised the Palestinians to put their trust in Sharon. He can make peace, he said, discreetly adding “If he wants to.”

Mubarak’s interests are clear. Every year he gets a huge subsidy from the United States, a donation that is vital for the stability of his regime. Funding this depends on the United States Congress, which is called by malicious tongues “Israeli Occupied Territory”. It is in his interest to be friendly with Sharon and help him out in his present predicament.

Sharon is in the middle of a delicate political maneuver. He has kicked out the Shinui party, his only remaining coalition partner, from the government. The huge and powerful Central Committee of his party will not allow him to set up a purely “secular” coalition with Shinui and the Labor Party, so he has to bring in the Ultra-Orthodox instead of Shinui.

Now he resembles a circus trapeze artist who has let go of one bar and, flying through the air, has to grab hold of another. There are many in his own party who are trying to push the other bar away, so that he will crash to the ground and break his neck.

If Sharon does not succeed, there will be elections. This means that for many months the whole political system will be paralyzed, the “disengagement” from Gaza will not

take place, peace will be off the agenda. That could mean the end of Abu Mazen's political career.

If, on the other hand, Sharon gets his new coalition with the Labor Party and the Ultra-Orthodox, and buys the consent of the Ultra-Orthodox to his "disengagement" plan, it will be the start of an obstacle race. Will the government succeed in mobilizing the public for a withdrawal from the whole of the Gaza Strip? Will it be able to remove the settlers without bloodshed? Will it give up the "Philadelphi axis" that cuts the Strip off from the world? Will it agree to the reopening of Gaza Port and the airport? Will it provide "safe passage" between the Strip and the West Bank? (That was a main plank of the Oslo agreement, consistently violated by all Israeli governments since.)

All these are a short sprint compared to the Marathon of the West Bank. It is an open secret that Sharon concocted the "disengagement plan" not only in order to rid himself of the responsibility for the million and a quarter Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, but mainly so he could quietly annex 58% of the West Bank. Will he give up this dream?

Optimists believe that the withdrawal from Gaza - if it does indeed take place, God willing - will engender a dynamic of its own. There is a "Window of Opportunity". After Sharon and Bush demonized Yasser Arafat for years and exploited the orchestrated hatred in order to sabotage any step towards peace, this alibi has now disappeared, along with the Palestinian leader himself. Also, Bush will want to use his last term of office to achieve something significant. Same for Shimon Peres. World public opinion will demand it. Europe will get involved. Sharon may be swept along by the current he himself has created. As the old Jewish saying goes: "If God wills it, even a broomstick can shoot!"

Others are much more pessimistic. They point to Sharon's legendary stubbornness. He will postpone talking about the West Bank until after the implementation of his Gaza plan. That will bring us to the end of 2005. The year after, 2006, will be devoted to the Israeli elections. And so forth. In the meantime, he creates "facts on the ground".

Who are right, the optimists or the pessimists? In truth, nobody can foresee today what will happen. It depends on many factors, including the Israeli peace camp. It goes without saying that we shall cooperate with any Palestinian leadership elected by its people, and it is not for us to interfere in this process.

A year will pass before we will know whether there is indeed a "window of opportunity" - or just a widow of opportunity.