

{DECEMBER 18 2004}

THE MOUNTAIN AND THE MOUSE

Ariel Sharon's speech at the "Herzliya Conference", an annual gathering of Israel's financial, political and academic aristocracy, proved again his wondrous ability to conjure up an imaginary world and divert attention away from the real one. Like every successful con-man, he knows that the audience desperately wants to believe good tidings and will be happy to ignore bad ones.

It was an optimistic message, as the bewitched commentators proclaimed. According to him, we are on our way to paradise, 2005 will be a year of tremendous progress in all fields and all our problems will be solved.

Most of the speech was devoted to his fabulous achievements since he launched, at the same conference a year ago, the "Unilateral Disengagement Plan".

This (in my own free translation) is what he said: America is in our pocket. President Bush supports all of Sharon's positions, including those that are diametrically opposed to Bush's own former positions. Europe has resigned itself to him. The Great of the World are standing in line to visit us, starting with Tony Blair. Egypt and the other Arab states are cosying up to us. Our international position has improved beyond recognition. The economy is advancing by leaps and bounds, our society is flourishing. Apart from the right-wing lunatic fringe, there is no opposition left. The Labor Party is joining the government and will support all its steps. (He somehow forgot to mention Yossi Beilin's Yahad party, which, too, has promised him an "iron bridge".)

Sharon has achieved all this solely by talking. His words have not been accompanied, up to now, by even one single action on the ground. There is no certainty that Sharon really intends to implement the "disengagement" at all. His intentions can be defined as follows:

- (1) If it is possible to avoid the implementation of the plan altogether, especially the evacuation of settlements, without losing the sympathy of the world and the Israeli public, fine.
- (2) If there is no alternative and implementation must start - everything must be

done to drag out the matter, and especially the evacuation of settlements, for as long as possible. Evacuate one settlement and rest. Evacuate another one and rest again. It should take years.

(3) Either way, the disengagement should not change the plans concerning the West Bank.

And in the meantime: In the Gaza Strip, from which Sharon is supposed to “disengage”, the Israeli army is in action every single day and night, killing from three to ten Palestinians every 24 hours. Houses are being destroyed wholesale. Some of the atrocities committed by the army have shocked the Israeli public. Not one single settler has been removed. On the contrary, new settlers have still been arriving.

All this does not point to any real determination to implement the promised disengagement. Sharon’s actions on the West Bank, on the other hand, show a solid determination to implement his plan there.

In the West Bank, the occupation has intensified . The cruel checkpoints continue to prevent any possibility of normal life. The photo showing a Palestinian violinist compelled to play for the soldiers at a roadblock has evoked terrible memories in the minds of many Israelis. The building of the annexation-wall goes on, with a few changes of the route to placate the Israeli court, while disregarding the decision of the International Court. The settlers uproot Palestinian olive groves in order to build new neighborhoods in their place. Settlements are being expanded all over the West Bank, a network of “Jews Only” roads is being built, more “illegal” outposts come into being under army protection and with the tacit help of all relevant ministries. Plenty of money flows into these projects, while pensions are being cut and sick people lie around in the corridors of the hospitals.

Is this how a statesman with a vision of peace acts? He behaves more like a doctor who treats the hand of a patient while sticking a knife into his belly.

All this is happening while the world gives Sharon enthusiastic support, solely on the strength of his talking. As long as he holds forth on the “disengagement”, he can pretty much do on the ground whatever he fancies.

David Ben-Gurion once said: “It is not important what the Gentiles say, what is important is what the Jews do.” Sharon’s version is: “It is not important what we say, what is important is what we do.”

The most important part of the speech was the part that was not there. There was no peace offer to the Palestinians. He did not talk about peace at all.

Throughout the world, the conviction is spreading that there now exists a “window of opportunity”, that this is the time for a new, redeeming peace initiative. Indeed, Sharon mentioned with great satisfaction that Yasser Arafat is dead and that there is

now a chance for the emergence of a “moderate Palestinian leadership”. So what did he offer this moderate leadership in his speech?

Not a thing.

He hinted vaguely at “long-term arrangements”. Meaning: more interim agreements on top of the existing interim agreements, whose sole aim is to push a real peace agreement beyond the horizon. It emerges from his speech that Israel will retain forever not only the “large settlement blocks”, but also “areas essential to our security”. Which areas could he mean? This is well-known: the Jordan valley and the other territories designed in the Oslo agreements as “Area C”. The final result of the “Disengagement Plan” will therefore be the annexation of 58% of the West Bank to Israel, as Sharon has wanted all along.

The Palestinians will retain, under this plan, 10-12% of pre-1948 Palestine, including the Gaza Strip (which is a mere 1.5% of the country). Sharon’s “Palestinian State” will consist of a number of enclaves cut off from the world. That is what he means when he talks about “the end of the occupation”, making “very painful concessions” and “our unwillingness to rule over another people”, words that have attracted widespread admiration.

To rule out any doubt, Binyamin Netanyahu, too, outlined in his speech at the conference the future borders between us and the Palestinians: “Not the Green Line and not even close to the Green Line.”

Nobody is offering the new Palestinian leadership peace negotiations. At most, some coordination of the steps leading to the withdrawal from Gaza. What else? The Minister of Defense, Shaul Mofaz, promised in his speech at the conference that the army would leave the Palestinian towns “for 72 hours” for the elections. Between roadblock and checkpoint, between one “targeted liquidation” and the next, Palestinian democracy will flourish for three days.

Sharon boasted that for all practical purposes the army has already vanquished terrorism. That was said a few days after the Palestinians, in a commando action that elicited some silent admiration even from the army, succeeded in destroying an entire army outpost on the “Philadelphi Axis” by detonating a huge amount of explosives in a tunnel dug beneath it and storming the remains. (This did not cause too much excitement in Israel, because all the five soldiers killed were Arabs, mostly Bedouin volunteers from among the state’s Arab citizens.)

For the time being, the number of violent attacks on Israeli citizens has indeed fallen, but mainly because of Abu Mazen’s efforts. This may well continue for some time, as long as the Palestinian public has some hope of seeing a light at the end of the tunnel. As soon as they lose this hope, they will give the green light to a new wave of attacks.

AVNERY | THE MOUNTAIN AND THE MOUSE

Sharon promises Israelis a wonderful year, a year of security and tranquility, economic growth and social progress. There is no chance of this coming about as long as he is blocking the road to peace and keeps the peace process “in formalin”, as described by his closest advisor.

European leaders talk about making a huge donation to the Palestinian authority after the election of Abu Mazen. This is an illusion as old as Zionism itself: that the Palestinian people - or any other people fighting for its freedom, for that matter - can be bought off and will give up its land and independence for a mess of pottage.

If the money is not accompanied by a massive European intervention for the speedy termination of the occupation and the attainment of a permanent Israeli-Palestinian solution, the mountain (as the ancient saying goes) will give birth to a mouse.

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