

{FEBRUARY 12 2005}

SHARM-AL-SHEIKH, WE HAVE COME BACK AGAIN

Nobody called it the “Ophira Conference”. Not even the papers of the extreme right. Who today even remembers the name Ophira, which was given to Sharm-al-Sheikh during the Israeli occupation, as a first step to its annexation?

Who wants to remember the famous saying of Moshe Dayan that “Sharm-al-Sheikh is more important than peace”? A few years later, the same Dayan took part in the peace negotiations with Egypt and gave Sharm-al-Sheikh back. But in the meantime, some 2500 young Israelis and who knows how many thousands of Egyptians paid with their lives for that statement in the Yom Kippur war.

While the conference went on, I could not clear my head of a song that was haunting me: “Sharm-al-Sheikh, we have come back again...” It was sung with gusto in the days of the stupid euphoria after the Six-Day war. It reminded people at the time that we had already conquered the place during the 1956 Sinai war but were compelled by the Eisenhower-Bulganin ultimatum to withdraw. So here we were again.

I was there in 1956. A beautiful gulf (“Sharm-al-Sheikh means “the bay of the old man”), a few small houses and a distinctive mosque. Before our army withdrew, a few months later, it blew up the mosque in a fit of pique.

Now, 22 years after leaving Ophira for the last time (nobody sang then “Sharm-al-Sheikh, we have left you again...”) all of us are treating the place as an Egyptian resort, as Egyptian as Cairo and Alexandria. The past has been erased. The occupation has been wiped from our collective memory.

That is the first optimistic lesson from the conference. One can withdraw. One can put an end to occupation. One can even forget that it ever took place.

The spirits of two people who were not there hovered over the proceedings.

One of them was George W. Bush. Neither he nor any other American sat at the large round table. But all the four who were sitting there knew that they are completely

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dependent on him. Husni Mubarak relies on the two billion dollars he gets every year from the United States, under the auspices of a Congress dominated by the pro-Israeli lobby. King Abdallah of Jordan gets much less, but his regime, too, depends on US support.

Ariel Sharon is the Siamese twin of Bush and cannot move without him. It is barely conceivable that he would do anything, big or small, that would upset Bush. Abu-Mazen, for his part, is playing *va banque* in the hope that Bush will help the Palestinians to cast off the occupation and establish their state.

So why did the Americans not come to Sharm? Because they are not ready to risk taking part in a process that might fail. They will come when success is assured. And today it is not.

The second absentee was Yasser Arafat.

The conference would not have taken place without his mysterious death. It deprived Sharon of the pretext to put peace in “formalin”, as described by Dov Weissglas, his closest advisor, who sat next to him throughout the conference. No Arafat, no pretext. Israeli propaganda, which worked so hard to portray Arafat as a devil, will have to toil hard to do the same to Abu Mazen.

Abu Mazen succeeded in slipping the name of Arafat into his speech, but only in an indirect way. But he – like every Palestinian – knows that it was the 45 years of Arafat’s work that laid the foundations on which Abu Mazen is now building his new strategy. Without the first intifada there would have been no Oslo, and without the second intifada there would have been no Sharm-al-Sheikh conference. Only the violent Palestinian resistance, which the Israeli army has not been able to put down, has brought Sharon to the round table.

The Israeli army knows by now that it cannot stamp out the insurgency by military means. The Palestinians have recovered their self-respect, much like the Egyptians after Yom Kippur. Many of them also believe that in his second term of office, Bush will impose withdrawal on Israel.

Incidentally, the demonization of Arafat has by no means stopped after his death. On the contrary, it goes on with great fervor. The Left and the Right in Israel, in heart-warming unity, declare in almost every article and TV talk-show that Arafat was the great obstacle to peace. Not the occupation. Not the settlements. Not the policy of Netanyahu-Barak-Sharon. Only Arafat. Fact: Arafat died and hopla – there is a conference.

The game played by Condoleezza Rice was especially amusing. She visited the Mukata’ah, where every stone shouts the name of Arafat. She did not lay a wreath on

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his grave – a minimal gesture of courtesy that would have won the hearts of the Palestinians. However, as a diplomatic compromise, she agreed to have her handshake with Abu Mazen photographed under the picture of Arafat.

Arafat smiled his canny smile. He surely understood.

So what was achieved at this conference?

Easier to say what was not.

The Oslo agreement failed because it did not spell out the final aim which was to be achieved after the tortuous interim stages. Arafat and Abu Mazen had a clear objective: a Palestinian State in all of the occupied territories with East Jerusalem as its capital, a return to the Green Line border (with minimal adjustments), dismantling the settlements and a practical solution to the refugee problem. The Israelis did not have the courage to define this inevitable solution, and many still dreamed about a Greater Israel.

That was a recipe for failure. And the very next day the quarrelling about every single paragraph began.

At Sharm-al-Sheikh the resolution of the conflict was not mentioned at all. Abu Mazen succeeded in slipping in some words, but Sharon did not react. This omission is very significant. It must be emphasized: Sharon did not utter a single word that does not conform with his plan of annexing 58% of the West Bank and enclosing the Palestinians in small enclaves in the rest of the territories.

The same goes for the timetable. In Oslo dates were indeed fixed, but the Israeli party had no intention of keeping to them. “There are no sacred dates,” Yitzhaq Rabin famously declared after signing the timetable.

That was a fatal mistake. Quite literally – it killed Rabin. The postponement of the solution allowed the opponents of peace the time to regain their strength, to regroup and mount the counter-attack that culminated in the assassination of Rabin. In vain did we quote to Rabin the dictum of Lloyd-George: “You cannot cross an abyss in two jumps.”

Abu Mazen said at Sharm-al-Sheikh that this is the first step on a long road. A long road is a dangerous road. All along it the saboteurs of peace, Israelis and Palestinians, are lurking.

Moreover, one of the basic conditions for a real peace process – and perhaps the most important one – is the truthful representation of reality. If one listened to all the speeches, one could get the impression that the root problem is “Palestinian terrorism”, and that if this stops, everything will be alright. In the following sequence: (a) The Palestinians end their “violence”, (b) Israel stops military actions, (c) security

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cooperation is established and (d) G*d and/or Allah will take care of the rest.

Pessimists will say: Nothing came from of the conference. The cease-fire is fragile. In the best case, Sharon will fulfil his promise of withdrawing from the Gaza Strip and dismantling a few settlements. Then the trouble will start anew.

Optimists will say: This is a good beginning. The cessation of “Palestinian terrorism” will create a new atmosphere in Israel. The dismantling of the first settlements will create a crucial confrontation. The settlers and the nationalist-messianic Right will be defeated. People will realize that life can be different. The dynamics of the process will carry Sharon along and he will not be able to stop it, even if he wants to.

Who is right?