

{APRIL 30 2005}

A TALE OF TWO DEMONSTRATIONS

The day before yesterday, two demonstrations were held, just a few dozen kilometers apart.

One took place at the Homesh settlement, not far from Jenin. Tens of thousands of settlers and their sympathizers came to demonstrate against the planned evacuation of this settlement. The demonstrators swore to sabotage the decisions of the government and the Knesset. One of them declared that they could be removed only in coffins draped with the national flag.

Hundreds of soldiers and policemen were stationed along the route to protect the demonstrators against all eventualities. The official Voice of Israel radio told its listeners that the traffic police were acting on instructions from the leaders of the Settlements Council.

At the same time, another demonstration took place at Bil'in, west of Ramallah. The inhabitants of that and the neighboring villages, together with Israeli peace activists, demonstrated against the "Separation Fence" that is being put up on their land.

This demonstration was savagely attacked by soldiers and policemen, who assaulted them, beat, injured and arrested them, using old and new weapons. The security people, as the Hebrew expression goes, "had murder in their eyes".

In this area, there is not even the pretense that the Separation Fence serves security purposes. The real aim is evident to anyone visiting the place: to rob Bil'in and the other villages of their land, in order to enlarge the settlement of Kiryat Sefer.

I remember that place from some ten years ago. Then, well-kept olive groves were being expropriated and destroyed by bulldozers. At that time, too, the villagers asked us to protest and try to stop this.

Now, a large town of ultra-orthodox Jews has been built there and is growing rapidly. The Separation Fence will pass close to the last houses of Bil'in and cut the village off from the remainder of its lands. On this land new neighborhoods of Kiryat Sefer will be built. Together with the nearby settlements of Modi'in Ilit and Matitiyahu, this is one of the "settlement blocs" that Israeli governments (whether Likud or Labor) want to

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annex to Israel, with the blessing of President Bush.

The plan of the villagers was to conduct a peaceful demonstration on the path of the Fence and plant some symbolic olive saplings there. But experience in this area has taught us that one must expect the security forces to react violently. Therefore, only activists who know the conditions and are experienced in dealing with them were asked to take part. We were some 200 Israelis, men and women of all ages. The instructions given in the buses, orally and in writing, were to keep the demonstration strictly non-violent.

We expected the buses to be stopped on the way and were prepared for this eventuality. We were, therefore, quite surprised when we reached the village without incident. Only later did we realize that it was a trap.

In the village, we joined some thousand inhabitants of this and the neighboring villages, men, women and children, and set off together towards the path of the Fence. At the head walked the former Palestinian minister Kadura Fares, the Palestinian presidential candidate Dr. Mustafa al-Barghouty, the Arab members of the Knesset Barakeh, Zakhalkh and Dahamsheh, the village chiefs and I. We were holding olive branches in our hands, to plant along the path of the Fence. The village youngsters also carried a 50-meter long Palestinian flag. Ahead of us a decorated van was driving slowly, and a Palestinian activist on it announced in Hebrew through a powerful loudspeaker: "This is a peaceful and non-violent demonstration!"

About a kilometer before the path of the Fence, a line of security people stopped us. They wore no insignia, and so we did not know whether they were soldiers or border policemen. Suddenly, without any warning, a salvo of tear gas grenades was launched at us. Within seconds, we were enveloped by a cloud of white gas, with the thump of bursting grenades coming at us from all directions.

The demonstrators, coughing and choking, dispersed to the two sides. Many of them outflanked the soldiers and continued to move forward over the rocky terrain. They were stopped by a second line and also showered with tear gas.

We, at the head of the demonstration, went on and reached a point about 50 meters from the path of the Fence, when a third line of soldiers attacked us. MK Barakeh had a heated exchange with an officer, and while they were arguing passionately a soldier fired a gas grenade at point blank range between Barakeh's legs. He was slightly wounded in the leg. Another, particularly ferocious soldier took hold of the poster I was holding in my hands – the Gush Shalom sign of the flags of Israel and Palestine – and pushed me savagely, knocking me over.

At other places, the rampage was even worse. Muhammad Hatib, one of the village chiefs, noticed a man who, with his face covered, started to throw stones at the soldiers.

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He ran towards him, shouting: “We decided not to throw stones! If you want to throw stones, do it in your own village, not ours! What village do you come from, anyway?” The man turned towards him and attacked him, at the same time calling out to his associates, tearing the handkerchief from his face and donning a police cap.

Thus the secret came out and was also documented by the cameras: “Arabized” undercover soldiers had been sent into action. These started throwing stones at the security people in order to provide them with a pretext to attack us. The moment they were uncovered, they turned on the demonstrators nearest to them, drew revolvers and started to arrest them. Later on, when it became clear that the events had been recorded by foreign television crews, the police officially confirmed that throwing stones is the method used by “Arabized” undercover soldiers so as to merge with the crowd.

In the course of the day, more details about the events emerged: this was a unit that had never before been used for such an action: the Prison Service unit “Massada”, whose normal job is to suppress mutinies in the prisons. This is an especially savage unit, perhaps the most violent in the country, which was supplied with new means of “riot control”. Among others: salt bullets that are designed to cause particularly painful wounds. Muhammad Hatib, the man mentioned above, 30 years old and father of two children, got four bullets in his back: large, swollen, black-blue rings the full width of his back.

These salt bullets were brought to Israel from America at the beginning of the 90s, but until now the army has shrunk from using them, fearing a public outcry. They were tried on us for the first time.

It appears that the army prepared the whole action in advance as a trap. The “Massada” unit tried out its tactics and weapons on this peaceful march of civilians.

The shocking difference between the ways the two demonstrations were treated provides food for thought.

The settlers are openly preparing and trying to paralyze the state, prevent the implementation of the government and Knesset decisions, and, in effect, to overthrow Israeli democracy. But Ariel Sharon and his people call publicly to “embrace them”, to “love them” and “view their pain with understanding”. This is the directive given to the security forces. For peace activists, quite different treatment is indicated.

This throws light on a much more important phenomenon that may determine the future of Israel. Here, people have got so used to it that they accept it as natural. Abroad, people don’t know about it.

The fact is that every day, all the Israeli media devote their main news reports to the settlers’ propaganda. Every single news program on each of the three TV channels

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gives exhaustive coverage to the affairs of the settlers, speeches by settlers and interviews with settlers. Often, these reports fill half the news program.

Between the settlers and the media a kind of symbiosis has come into being – they work “with one head”. Every day several events are prepared for the media, which scoop them up greedily, to serve as unpaid propaganda organs of the settlers and the extreme right. Once upon a time, it was usual to give the other side the right of response, for the sake of “balance”. Not anymore. There is no other side.

In the news programs, not a word – literally not a word – of criticism of the settlers is ever heard. The establishment “leftists” also speak of the need to “embrace them” and “understand them”, and so, of course, do all the spokespersons of the government and the big parties. To people who have an opposite opinion, no opportunity is given to speak about the settlers on the main media of the country.

In this way, Israeli democracy puts all its media exclusively at the disposal of the enemies of democracy. Even in the Weimar Republic, stupidity did not go this far.

Absurd? It only seems so. In reality, it reflects the real situation: in spite of all the loud talk about “disengagement”, Sharon’s heart is with the settlers. He intends to annex to Israel most of the West Bank settlements – if not all of them.

The present controversy about a handful of small settlements in the Gaza Strip is, in his eyes, a kind of family spat, and will pass quickly. Actually, Sharon might be interested in feeding the commotion, so as to convince the Americans that it is unrealistic to expect him to dismantle the West Bank settlements and outposts. Fact: the army and police have never once used tear gas against right-wing demonstrators, even when physically attacked and injured by them (as happens regularly in Hebron, for example) or when the settlers block vital roads and cause huge traffic jams.

On the other hand, the controversy with us, the peace activists, the real opposition to the government, is a genuine struggle for the future of Israel: whether it will be a state within the Green Line borders, a liberal, democratic state that lives in peace with a viable Palestinian state at its side; or an aggressive, nationalist state, that will hold on to practically the whole of the West Bank and keep the Palestinians in some isolated enclaves.

If one sees it that way, the directives given to the army are quite logical: Embrace the settlers, because they are our brothers, and hit the peace activists, because they are the enemy.

AVNERY | MARIE AND THE GHOSTS

AVNER Y | SHARON'S SKIN AND BUSH'S SPOTS