

{JULY 16, 2005}

# SILENCE IS FILTH

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**S**o where is the cease-fire? Will Hamas and Islamic Jihad torpedo the withdrawal from Gaza? What is happening to Mahmoud Abbas?

Generally, a cease-fire is declared in one of three cases:

- When one side beats the other into submission,
- When a third party imposes it on the two belligerents,
- When both sides are exhausted.

In our case, neither of the parties has succeeded in overcoming its opponent. The Israeli army has not raised the white flag, and neither have the Palestinians. The cease-fire was not imposed by a third party. The Americans did exert some feeble pressure, and the Egyptians, too, tried to make their presence felt. But there was no real external pressure.

What happened was that both sides got tired. The fighting had reached a standstill, a kind of stalemate, and this situation could have gone on forever, doing no good to anyone. The Palestinians have suffered grievously, but their suffering has not driven them to capitulate. The Israeli army had no answer to the mortar shells and Qassam missiles that kept the inhabitants of nearby Israeli towns on edge, but were not sufficient for a military victory. Fatigue led to the cease-fire.

But this cease-fire was fragile from the start. First, because it was not mutual, accepted officially by the two parties. It was not even called a “cease-fire”, not to mention “armistice” (Hudna in Arabic). It was called “calm” (Tahidiya in Arabic). The Palestinian National Authority arrived at an agreement with the Palestinian armed factions to hold their fire, and Sharon hinted through intermediaries that in return he, too, would abstain from firing.

That is a poor basis for a cease-fire. The tacit agreement did not define precisely what each side was going to cease doing. Since each side reserves the right to “respond” if the other side does something that, in its opinion, contravenes the cease-fire, and there is no referee or mechanism for arbitration, the situation could get out of hand at any moment.

In the Gaza Strip, the Israeli army did indeed stop the “targeted killings” and the incursions, but it redoubled its aggressive campaign against the Palestinians in the West Bank. The Wall, which spells misery and poverty for tens of thousands of Palestinian families and grabs the land of dozens of villages, is being built with renewed vigor. In Jerusalem, the Wall that cuts into the flesh of the Palestinian population is nearing completion. The security forces open fire on Palestinians (and Israeli peace activists) who demonstrate against the wall, killing some and wounding others, with many arrested.

At the same time, the Israeli army is in action all over the West Bank. Army units carry out incursions by day and by night, conduct searches, arrest or kill “wanted” people.

Is this a violation of the cease-fire? Not at all, assert Sharon’s people. According to them, the cease-fire applies to the Gaza Strip only. The Palestinians, on their part, see in this another attempt to separate the West Bank from the Gaza Strip, an effort inherent in Sharon’s “Disengagement plan”. They object to this, of course, with all their strength. And indeed, the Oslo agreement, which was signed and recognized by the international community, states explicitly that the West Bank and the Gaza Strip constitute one integral territorial unit.

So who is violating the cease-fire? Since the “unspoken agreement” is not written down and does not go into details, there can be no definitive answer to this. Each side claims that the other is the violator and that it is only responding.

So what are Hamas and Islamic Jihad up to?

They want, of course, to present Israel’s retreat from the Gaza Strip and the evacuation of the settlements as their victory, just as Israel’s retreat from Lebanon was the victory of Hizbullah. So the launching of mortar shells and Qassams intensified from the moment Sharon decreed the closure of the settlements this week, turning the coming disengagement into a virtual certainty.

The assertion is not entirely unfounded. A child can understand that Sharon would not withdraw from the Gaza Strip if he could sit there in comfort. One of the reasons for Sharon’s decision to leave was that keeping Gaza and defending the settlements was too costly for the Israeli army and treasury.

The arrogant boasts of our politicians and generals about the huge success of the Israeli army in “defeating terrorism” - as if the drastic reduction in Palestinian attacks was not the result of the cease-fire but a big military achievement - provoked the Palestinian organizations into an effort to prove the contrary.

But the main motive for Hamas is domestic. The organization wants to convert its battlefield success into political capital. To this end, it wants to prove that the Authority

simply cannot function without it. Apart from that, Hamas, as usual, is being dragged along by the more extreme Islamic Jihad (as the Irgun, in its time, was dragged along by the Stern Group.)

A mortar shell that kills an Israeli is, in reality, aimed at Mahmoud Abbas.

And what is happening to Abbas?

No leadership can function when its policies are obstructed by armed factions. When Mahmoud Abbas is accepting international obligations and the armed factions on the ground are violating them, it is clear that there is no Palestinian leadership that can carry out a coherent Palestinian policy. That is a disaster for the Palestinian people.

It is undoubtedly in the Palestinian interest to keep the peace while the Israeli withdrawal is taking place. In spite of what is happening in the West Bank, and in spite of the inherent faults of the “disengagement plan,” it is worthwhile for the Palestinians to enable Sharon to dismantle the settlements and to put down the settlers’ counter-attack – if only because the evacuation of Gush Katif establishes an important precedent. It is really Sharon himself who is interested in having the withdrawal accompanied by a lot of mayhem that would show how terribly difficult it is, along, of course, with the settlers themselves.

The actions of Hamas and Jihad at this time play, therefore, into the hands of the settlers. It shows again that there is a kind of involuntary cooperation between the nationalist-religious fundamentalists of the two sides.

Is Abbas strong enough to compel or convince Hamas and Jihad to cease fire?

One person, at least, hopes that the answer is negative: Ariel Sharon.

From the moment Abbas was democratically elected, Sharon has been working with persistence and cunning to eliminate him. This is important, in his view, because George Bush has started to get closer to the new Palestinian leader. The strengthening of Abbas would reinforce the pressure on Sharon to end the occupation of the West Bank. Therefore, for Sharon, “Silence is Filth”, in the words of an anthem written some 80 years ago by Vladimir Jabotinsky, who founded the forerunner of the Likud party.

That explains why Sharon is repeatedly humiliating Abbas in public, why he has not allowed him even the slightest political achievement, why his spokesmen are declaring daily that Abbas is “weak”, that he is “no leader”, that he is “incapable of destroying the terrorist infrastructure”.

Sharon once described Abbas as a “featherless chicken”. This is a self-fulfilling prophecy. When Abbas cannot show his public any political success at all, no alleviation of the misery in which they live, no release of any important prisoner, no stop to the building of the Wall that is strangling them - the credit given him by his people is diminishing by the hour.

## **AVNERY | SILENCE IS FILTH**

I hope that the cease-fire will hold, in spite of everything. I have faith in the common sense of the Palestinians, who will understand their national interest at this time. I believe that after the withdrawal from Gaza there will arise a historic opportunity for a big step towards ending the occupation and achieving a lasting Israeli-Palestinian peace.

But probably, right at this moment, a settler somewhere is praying for a mortar shell to fall on a crowded Israeli kindergarten and put an end to the withdrawal - because for the settlers, too, "Silence is Filth".