

{JULY 30, 2005}

THE MOMENT OF TRUTH

At this moment, Israel resembles a patient before an operation. Like every major operation, it is dangerous. The patient hopes that everything will go well, but knows that there is no guarantee.

In 16 days, the evacuation of 21 settlements in the Gaza Strip and four in the north of the West Bank is due to begin. It is supposed to take three weeks.

What will the State of Israel look like on the 7th of September? Almost nobody speaks or even thinks about that. The collective mind refuses to deal with it, as if it were five decades away, and not just five weeks. The main thing is to get through the operation safely. Who cares what will happen afterwards?

But if one feels any responsibility for the future of Israel, one must indeed think about it. The situation five weeks from now depends, of course, on what happens during these five weeks. This is quite impossible to foresee. Impossible even to guess.

There are several widely divergent possibilities, with many variations in between.

Possibility #1: The operation goes smoothly. A lot of noise, shouting, pushing, suicide threats. Nothing more.

We have already seen this scenario once, in the jolly Yamit days of 1982. The settlers barricaded themselves on the roofs and were taken down in iron cages. Some of them locked themselves in a bunker full of explosives and threatened to blow themselves up, only to emerge later, whole and hale. A young thug named Tsachi Hanegbi climbed a tall tower and had himself photographed like a hero at Massada, and then climbed down again quietly and in due course became a cabinet minister. A lot of white foam, no dead, no wounded. That can happen this time, too.

This possibility is the one preferred by Ariel Sharon, who was in command of the Yamit evacuation at the time. The more noise, the easier it will be for him to convince the world (and Condoleezza Rice) of the sheer impossibility of evacuating the big West Bank settlements.

Possibility #2: There will be serious resistance, the settlers' leadership will lose

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control, soldiers and policemen will react angrily, blood will be spilled. The majority of the public will unite behind the army, which is a part of the people and considered by many as the holiest of holies. The minority will become even more extreme. The gap between the two camps will become an abyss of hatred.

Possibility #3: The operation will grind to a halt in the middle. It will be impossible to carry out the evacuation. Soldiers and policemen will be unable – physically or mentally – to carry it out in face of the resolute resistance of the settlers and the masses of their supporters, who will stream into the area. Sharon will be faced with the choice between using arms of all kinds – tear gas, truncheons, rubber-coated bullets, live ammunition – or admit defeat. The government will fall.

This possibility is preferred by the settlers' leadership. It will block any chance of dismantling even the smallest settlements in the West Bank. The State of Israel will, in practice, capitulate to the State of the Settlers.

It is impossible to guess what will happen, because one pistol and one crazy person – a brain-washed settler, a lone assassin like Yig'al Amir or an angry soldier – will be enough to set off a huge explosion.

If the operation is completed as planned, it will be a triumph for Sharon. He will be able to start the next phase of his grand design.

The plan is not secret. Indeed, it has been announced loudly by Sharon himself and his confidant, Dov Weisglass. They outlined it more than once, both in private conversation and in public statements.

The aim is to annex as large an area as possible without incorporating a significant number of Arabs. This amounts to the annexation of some 58% of the West Bank to Israel and the creation of autonomous enclaves for the Palestinians in their towns and densely populated village areas.

In order to carry out this plan, Sharon has chosen the following methods:

(a) **Avoidance of any negotiations.** Sharon adamantly refuses to have any real negotiations with the Palestinian leadership. He knows that such negotiations will inevitably lead to the withdrawal of Israel to a slightly amended Green Line that will, at most, allow for the annexation of the settlement blocs adjoining the pre-1967 border. Therefore, negotiations must be prevented on every possible pretext: "There is nobody to talk with", "Mahmoud Abbas is a weakling", "We shall not talk with him until he destroys the infrastructure of terrorism and incitement", and suchlike.

(b) **"Unilateralism"**. After the "unilateral" disengagement from Gaza, Israel will unilaterally fix its borders according to its "security and demographic needs", as determined by itself. According to Sharon's announcements, this will include the annexation of "essential security areas, the large settlement blocs and Greater

Jerusalem”. Meaning: all the Jordan valley and the eastern slopes of the central Palestinian mountain range; the Jerusalem area, Ma’aleh Adumim and all the area between them; all the settlement blocs and the roads connecting them to each other and to Israel.

(c) **Immediate implementation.** This is not a plan for sometime in the future but an operational order for today. It is already being carried out now by finishing the building of the wall/fence, the construction of new settlements, especially in the area between the wall and the Green Line, and the building of new roads.

(d) **Dismantling remote settlements.** Small settlements located in areas not to be annexed must be evacuated. The announcement of the intention to dismantle them will enable Sharon to present himself as a Man of Peace and obtain American consent for his plan. For this purpose, everything will be accompanied by vague statements about the intention of achieving a permanent settlement with the Palestinians sometime in the future, after they eliminate the “terrorist infrastructure” and “internalize” Israel’s new borders.

Sharon still hopes that after the dust of the “disengagement” settles, he will succeed in coming to an agreement with the settlers about this plan. But the chances for that are slim. It is precisely the small settlements inside the future Palestinian enclaves which Sharon plans to abandon that house the hard core of the settlers’ movement and are the centers of the nationalist-messianic creed. One cannot even dream of evacuating places like Ophra, Beth-El, Yitshar, Brakha, Tapuakh and their like without bloodshed, whatever happens at Gush Katif. The real purpose of the struggle of the settlers for Gush Katif is to frighten the public and convince them that any further confrontation will be even more extreme.

The Sharon plan represents a great danger for the future of Israel. It is based on the assumption that peace with the Palestinian people, and the entire Arab world, is neither desirable nor important, compared with achieving the widest possible borders for a Greater Israel. If implemented, it will lead to the collapse of the Palestinian Authority, push the Palestinian people into the arms of extreme Islamic movements, and ignite a war that will go on for many years.

At the moment, the Israeli peace forces are busy furthering the Gaza disengagement and fighting against the settlers, among other things by distributing the blue ribbon. Only a small, radical part continues fighting against the Wall, exposing its real aim inside Israel and abroad and incessantly demonstrating against its ongoing construction. Most of the peace forces sing hosannas to Sharon personally. But the moment this operation is completed, the whole camp must rally against Sharon and his plan.

The peace forces must start without delay to prepare themselves – mentally and

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practically – for that moment, when they must use the dynamics of the withdrawal from Gaza in order to achieve the withdrawal from all the Palestinian territories. In other words: to turn the struggle against the Gush Katif settlements into a struggle against all the settlements that stand in the way of peace with the Palestinians.

That will not be easy. After the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin, the settlers and their supporters, aiming at damage control, started a well-publicized campaign of “reconciliation”. This may happen again. They will declare that after the settlers were “driven out of their homes” and the people have been “torn apart”, the order of the day must be to bring the people together in order to “mend the rift”. They will easily find left-wing suckers who will again fall into the trap. The real aim, of course, will be to prevent the dismantling of the settlements in the West Bank.

Indeed, Ehud Olmert, a Likud party hack and Sharon’s shield-bearer, kicked off this campaign just yesterday. He declared that immediately after the disengagement, the country must concentrate entirely on two issues: internal reconciliation and solving social problems. Peace? Forget it!

While we are busy with one struggle, it is difficult for us to devote any attention to the next one and prepare for it. But we must do that. The Moment of Truth is approaching rapidly – and in five short weeks it will be here.