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SHARON'S DANCING BEAR

Once upon a time there was a popular kind of street show: a bear would dance for the amusement of passers by, who would throw coins into his box. The bear was big and frightening, but his clumsy movements made people laugh. He was much stronger than his master, who kept him on a chain, but submitted to him completely. A wonder to behold.

The national symbol of the United States is the eagle. The bear, as everybody knows, is the national symbol of Russia. But looking at the Sharon-Bush relationship, it is the old master-and-bear show that inevitably springs to mind.

Ariel Sharon plays games with the American bear. He makes him dance, jump, lie down and get up again, turn around and perform somersaults, much to the amusement of the Israeli public.

Every few months Sharon invents a new act. The bear applauds and does what he is commanded to do, until the performance loses its novelty. Then Sharon comes up with something new.

That happened with the act called the Road Map. To be accurate, this one was not invented by Sharon, but by the bear himself. Bush had a Vision. A real inspiration. "Two States for Two Peoples". Something new and revolutionary. (Never mind that the 1947 UN resolution establishing Israel included this, and that Israeli and Palestinian peace activists had been preaching this idea for decades. The bear's brain works slowly, and, as the saying goes, better late than never.)

This vision brought forth the Road Map. A very complex and convoluted map. If an ordinary driver had to find his way with such a map, he would never see his destination. But the map bore the personal stamp of the President of the United States, as well as the signatures of Europe, Russia and the United Nations. So who could have any doubts about it?

The act started in Aqaba. George Double-U likes to have his picture taken against impressive backgrounds. Indeed, it seems that he spends considerable time and energy choosing the backdrop for his next photo - an aircraft carrier, a full army division on parade, jubilant soldiers in Baghdad... This time, too, he found an impressive

background: tropical shore, blue sea, tall palm-trees, exotic landscape. Sharon and Abu-Mazen performing as extras. They received the Road Map in a solemn ceremony, much as Moses received - not far from there - the tablets of the Ten Commandments.

But photos can lie, and this one was misleading, too. It was not Sharon who was the extra in this act, but Bush. It was not the bear who made his master dance, but the other way around.

The act was devoid of content. The Road Map was already dead before it was born, because Sharon never dreamt of following its course. He has a different map, different routes and different destinations.

On the face of it, Sharon's response was "Yes, but..." He added 14 reservations that emptied the document of any content. They stipulated that the Sharon government would implement its part of the deal only after the Palestinians had accomplished a number of impossible tasks. The Palestinians, of course, could not, and the result was that Abu-Mazen disappeared from the scene.

And Sharon? He played the game to the end. Sent emissaries to Washington, conducted talks, received American functionaries, visited the White House and swore at every opportunity that he had no aim more sacred than realizing Bush's Vision. The American President melted and sang the praises of this "Man of Peace".

According to the Road Map, Sharon was obliged to remove all the settlements set up since the beginning of his term in early 2001. But he had the bear dance to the left and to the right, until the poor beast did not know the difference anymore. So, not all the settlements should be removed. Only the "illegal" outposts. (Illegal according to the laws of the occupation authorities, of course.) And not all the illegal outposts, by any means, just one or two. In the end, not a single one was removed. But the American bear danced on happily.

In the meantime, scores of new outposts have sprung up, all of them "illegal". The Israeli government connected them up with water and electricity and built new roads for them. Huge sums were spent on them - money taken from the education, health and welfare budgets. The older settlements, too, were expanded at a frantic pace. The landscape of the West Bank was changing visibly. Everywhere, new roads for the convenience of the settlers came into being. And the bear danced on.

To all of this, the Wall was added. At first, it was presented as a security fence and it was assumed that it would follow, more or less, the 1967 Green Line. But soon it became apparent that it was cutting deep into the West Bank, annexing large tracts of land and turning the declared aim of the Road Map - a viable Palestinian state - into a mockery. The American satellites took pictures, and the bear still danced on. The main thing was, after all, that Sharon continued to praise the Road Map.

And then Sharon got fed up with the act, and perhaps he was afraid that the bear would get tired or nervous. So he invented a new dance: Unilateral Disconnecting. We leave the Gaza Strip, dismantle 14 settlements there, and, for good measure, some settlements on the West Bank, too.

So everything has started again right from the beginning. Emissaries are being sent to America. Emissaries from America are being received in Jerusalem. Sharon's confidant, Dov Weisglas, will go and see Condoleezza. An Israeli general will meet with an American general. Sharon will visit the White House. And in Israel itself the proper backdrop for the performance is being set up in the form of stormy demonstrations of the settlers, fierce denunciations by rabbis, threats of cabinet crises, dozens of articles by learned pundits promising that this time, this very time, the 101st time, he is serious. This time Sharon truly means what he says.

Washington is jubilant. Well, maybe it is not exactly the Road Map, but one can pretend that it is. The main thing is that Sharon is again shown to be a Man of Peace, ready for withdrawal and the dismantling of settlements. Who would have believed it?

This week, Bush sent Three Wise Men to Sharon (including Elliot Abrams, a gentleman slightly more Zionist than Sharon himself, if such a thing were possible) in order to ask politely: From where exactly does Sharon intend to withdraw? Exactly which settlements does he plan to give up? When exactly is it going to happen? And, please, could one perhaps have a look at a map?

Sharon laughed in their faces. No map. No timetable. No nothing. It is still an idea. People are working on it. Here in the corner, a Real General is thinking about it all the time.

Certainly. They will think, prepare papers, fly to Washington and back, Dov will meet Condoleezza, Sharon will see Bush. (In the meantime, the Americans are being asked to give some billions for the payment of compensation to the settlers. Since the Americans paid billions for installing the settlers in the first place, it is only right that they should pay a few more billions to move them out again.)

And so it will continue, until Sharon gets tired of this act, too. Then he will invent a new one. After all, the main thing is for the bear to keep on dancing.