

{JULY 24 2004}

THE SKIN OF THE BEAR

I am writing this with an aching heart. I have postponed writing it as long as I could. In Jewish tradition, there is a searing phrase: “The Temple was not destroyed but for gratuitous hatred.” It sums up the events in beleaguered Jerusalem, in the year 70 AD, when the town was surrounded by the Roman legions. While Titus’ soldiers were maintaining the siege and the population was beginning to starve, inside the town ferocious battles took place between various factions of zealots, who killed each other and burnt each other’s last stores of wheat.

Something like this is now taking place in the Palestinian territories. While the occupation forces are tightening the siege and carrying out “targeted killings”, battles between the Palestinians themselves have broken out, with militants shooting at each other, targeting leaders and burning headquarters.

Occupation generals, politicians and commentators in Israel follow the events with glee or click their tongues sanctimoniously: “Didn’t we tell you? The Palestinians can’t rule themselves, there is no one to talk with, we have no partner for peace. When they are left to themselves, anarchy reigns.” On many Israeli tongues the Greek word “chaos” (pronounced with an American accent) was rolling.

Since the Sharon government is responsible for the present situation in Gaza in the first place, it resembles the son who kills both his parents and pleads in court: “Have mercy! I am an orphan!”

Paradoxically, the Palestinian factions, of all people, seem to believe Sharon’s announcement about his intention to leave Gaza. What is happening there is, first of all, a fight about the skin of the bear that has not yet been caught.

Everybody talks about “reforms”, a word dear to the Americans, but the battle is about power and control.

Muhammad Dahlan’s faction hopes to take possession of the Gaza Strip before Sharon’s promised withdrawal. Sharon’s people are open about their preference for this group. The Americans support them in order to suit Sharon, and the Egyptians support them to please the Americans.

The rival faction supports Mussa Arafat who was sent by his relative, Yasser Arafat, to control the security apparatus. He may not be the most popular appointee, but the leader in far-away Ramallah appointed his most trusted lieutenant in order to fend off the danger he fears most: that the Gaza Strip will cut itself off from the West Bank and become a kind of autonomous Bantustan under Israeli-American-Egyptian tutelage.

This is what is happening on the surface. But the events also have deeper roots in the present Palestinian situation, which consists of an existential contradiction.

On the one side, the Palestinian war of liberation is far from over. It is at its height. It can well be said that never has the very existence of the Palestinians - both as a nation and as individuals - been in greater danger than now.

On the other hand, on the West Bank and in the Gaza Strip there has come into being a kind of mini-state that requires a state-like administration: security, economy, education, justice, welfare and so on.

The surreal situation in Gaza reflects this contradiction: while Mussa Arafat, Muhammad Dahlan and the other Fatah leaders fight each other for control of the Palestinian Authority and its security organs, a brutal war is going on between the occupation forces and the Tanzim, Hamas and Jihad militants.

The leader of the Palestinian war of liberation is Yasser Arafat. Among the Palestinians, no one contests that. He is the only person able to safeguard the unity of the Palestinian people. He is the only leader with a wide strategic grasp of all the geographic and functional aspects of the dispersed Palestinian people. He has the attributes necessary for a leader in such a situation: an uncontested personal authority, physical courage, the ability to make decisions and a talent for manoeuvre. Palestinians call him the 'Father of the Nation' and compare him with George Washington, David Ben-Gurion and Nelson Mandela.

The criticism of Arafat, prevalent mostly among the intellectual and political elite - concerns his functioning as the chief of the "mini-state". Unlike the Prime Minister of Israel, Arafat is not suspected of personal corruption. He is being blamed for the fact that the Palestinian Authority is too much like the other Arab regimes, suffering from concentration of power, proliferation of security apparatuses, corruption, cronyism and the undue influence of big families.

As a Palestinian member of parliament told me recently: "Arafat leads the national struggle, and all of us support him. But he neglects the domestic order, and against that we protest."

However, Sharon is not fighting against Arafat to encourage him to delegate power or because he has seven different security formations (the United States has 15 intelligence agencies, four military services and an untold number of police

organizations.) He is fighting against Arafat because his elimination will cause the disintegration of the Palestinian nation into splinters and thus clear the way for ethnic cleansing. Arafat is very much aware of this danger and, in comparison, all the diseases of the Palestinian Authority seem to him secondary.

The strategy of Sharon and his generals is simple and brutal: to destroy the Palestinian Authority, turn life in the occupied territories into hell, disintegrate Palestinian society and drive the survivors from the country, not in one dramatic sweep (as in 1948) but in a slow, continuous, creeping process.

Up to now, this has not succeeded. In spite of inhuman conditions, the Palestinian society has held on in a manner that arouses wonderment. The events of the last few weeks look to Sharon and the army chiefs like signs of collapse. I believe they are wrong and that the Palestinian society will draw back from the abyss.

It is reasonable to expect that the prisoner in the Mukata'ah, who has already led his people out from so many existential crises, will do so again. I sincerely hope so, because Arafat is the only person who can make peace with us. We will know no peace, as long as our neighbors do not.