

{APRIL 17 2004}

SHARON'S SKIN AND BUSH'S SPOTS

Question: *Is the “Unilateral Disengagement” plan, which was so dramatically endorsed this week by President Bush, a bluff?*
Answer: Yes and No. If Ariel Sharon can avoid implementing it, he certainly will. He will implement it only if he has no alternative. The written plan says that it will be implemented “by the end of 2005” – and by then the situation in this country and in the Middle East as a whole may be changed beyond recognition.

Anyhow, up to now no preparations have begun. There is no answer to the dozens of questions that must be addressed before a meaningful plan for implementation can even begin to be formulated. For example: Where will the settlers go? How much compensation will they get? Who will control the Gaza strip after the withdrawal? To whom will the houses and public buildings be turned over? How will the army execute the evacuation? Where will the evacuated army forces be relocated?

Question: *If this is the case, why has Sharon put the plan on the agenda at this time?*

Answer: There are several explanations, all of them valid.

After several years of being accused of “having no plan” and of being old and tired, Sharon has taken a bold initiative. The country and the whole world is talking about the “Sharon Plan”. The Geneva initiative, by comparison, has been pushed firmly to one side.

Also, Sharon wants to use the time left, as long as George Bush is in the White House, in order to get an American endorsement for several of the ingredients of his real, long-term plan.

Of course, Sharon also wants to put pressure on the new Attorney General, so that he would not dare to indict him, since this would mean sabotaging a historic step which will benefit Israel.

As always, all of Sharon's declarations and deeds are designed to meet the requirements of the moment. That was true when he was a general, and it remains so now, when he is a politician. He is a “tactical”, rather than a “strategic” leader.

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Question: *Has Sharon really undergone a profound change? Has the “Ethiopian changed his skin”, to use the expression of Jeremiah (13, 23)? Has he now turned his back on his lifetime accomplishments?*

Answer: The Ethiopian has not changed his skin. An analysis of the plan, as endorsed by Bush and shown at long last to the Israeli ministers, reveals that it conforms exactly to the plan that Sharon has been propounding for decades. He just cut out a piece of it and is presenting it as an up-to-date plan.

What is his overall plan?

The maximum plan is to turn all of the land between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River into a Jewish State, with no non-Jewish population. Since such an ethnic cleansing is not feasible for the time being, he is implementing his minimum plan: to enlarge the borders of the Jewish State as much as possible, without incorporating a further large Arab population.

Therefore he wants to get rid of the Gaza Strip with its 1.2 million Palestinian inhabitants. He is prepared to evacuate the 7,000 Jewish settlers who are living there, in return for the consolidation of the West Bank settlements, where 250,000 Jewish settlers live.

Sharon wants to incorporate in Israel 55% of the West Bank – the area where most of the settlers are located and the Arab population is relatively sparse. The plan spells it out: “It is clear that in the Judea and Samaria region there will remain areas that will be part of the State of Israel, including civilian localities, security areas and other places where Israel has additional interests” (Article 1c – *Since the plan has been leaked only in Hebrew, I have made the translation.*) This definition could include practically anything.

Almost all the Palestinian population in the West Bank, some 2.5 million people, will be crowded into the remaining 45% of the area, which, together with the Gaza Strip, will constitute about 10% of the country called Palestine under the British mandate, before 1948. This area will be a kind of archipelago in the big Israeli sea. Each “island” will be cut off from the others and surrounded by Israeli areas. The islands will be artificially connected by new roads, bridges and tunnels, so as to create the illusion of a “viable, contiguous state”, as the Americans demand. According to the written plan: “Israel will improve the transportation infrastructure in the Judea and Samaria region, in order to make possible uninterrupted Palestinian transportation” (4). In practice, these connections can be cut off within minutes at any time. Pretexts can always be found easily.

Sharon does not mind if this collection of enclaves is called a “Palestinian state” according to Bush’s “vision”.

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Question: *What is the connection between this and the "Separation Fence"?*

Answer: The path of the fence – both the part that has already been built and the parts that will be built in the future – reflects this map well. That is how it was planned from the beginning. "Israel will continue building the Security Fence, according to the relevant government decisions" (5c). In his letter to Sharon, Bush said: "a security rather than a political barrier ... temporary rather than permanent." Meaning, temporary until Sharon or his successors decide otherwise. Meaning: forever.

Question: *Why does the Israeli army support the plan?*

Answer: The evacuation of the forces from the Gaza Strip and the relocation of those in the West Bank will enable the army to save many resources, manpower as well as money. At present, a whole army division is guarding the Gaza Strip, and many battalions are guarding the dozens of isolated settlements in the heart of the West Bank. The plan allows the army to deploy its forces rationally and to put an end to the present dispersion of forces that is contrary to all military logic.

Question: *Why does Sharon agree to evacuate four settlements in the north of the West Bank?*

Answer: The Americans demand a symbolic gesture, in order to show that the plan does not apply to the Gaza Strip alone. Actually, the evacuation of the four small settlements has only symbolic value. This is a negligible area with a few small and unimportant settlements. Sharon's settlement and annexation map in any case provides for the evacuation of dozens of small settlements in the areas that will be left to the Palestinians.

Question: *What will happen in the Gaza Strip if Sharon indeed evacuates it?*

Answer: The disengagement will be deceptive. The direct occupation will be changed into an indirect one that will be much cheaper and more efficient. According to the plan, the Gaza strip will become a giant prison camp, cut off on all sides. It will have no seaport or airport and be cut off from its only neighbor, Egypt. There will be no entering the Strip or leaving it except through Israel. Much as now, Israel will be able to cut off the supply of food, raw materials, water, fuel, gas and electricity, as well as the exit of workers and goods. Israel will also be able to invade the Strip at any time in order to "prevent terrorist actions".

The plan spells it out: "Israel reserves to itself the basic right of self-defense, including the taking of preventive steps" (3). Not only did the President agree to this, but in his letter he extended this to the West Bank, too: "...control of airspace, territorial

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waters, and land passages of the West Bank and Gaza will continue.” Meaning that according to the “Bush vision”, the Palestinian State in the West Bank also will be a prison camp, completely cut off from the world. A hopeful vision, indeed.

The written text of the plan also argues that in the new situation to be created, no one will be able to hold Israel responsible for the welfare of the population. After all, the occupation will be terminated. This means that Israel will be able to choke the Strip, but the responsibility will fall on others.

Question: *If this is so “good for Israel”, why does Sharon not implement the evacuation of the Gaza Strip at once?*

Answer: No politician looks for trouble. The evacuation of the Strip will entail violent clashes with the settlers, not only with the local ones but also with the West Bank settlers. That’s why Sharon prefers to talk about the withdrawal rather than implement it.

Question: *If Sharon thinks that the settlements in the Gaza Strip are a burden and a stumbling block, why did he put them there in the first place? Why did he declare, not so long ago, that Netzarim, a completely isolated settlement in the heart of the Gaza Strip, is as important as Tel-Aviv?*

Answer: That declaration, like all his utterances, served only to satisfy a momentary need. The Gaza Strip settlements were put up without much thinking, as a result of the settlement inertia and a complete contempt for the Arabs. The people responsible believed that the Strip would never be given back, and, if the worst comes to the worst, they could keep at least the settlements.

All in all, the establishment of the Gaza Strip settlements was a crime that has cost much blood and billions of dollars. The Labor Party is responsible for this crime as much as Likud. But Israelis are quick to forget, and nobody will blame Sharon and Peres for the death of the soldiers and settlers who were killed there – and who are still being killed – for nothing.

Questions: *If the Ethiopian has not changed his skin, has the leopard changed his spots? Has the American position indeed changed dramatically this week?*

Answer: The change lies mainly in the blatant and unequivocal support of Bush for Sharon, giving up all pretense of being an honest broker and mediator. Like Sharon, Bush is now completely ignoring the Palestinian people and its leadership. This has evoked an outburst of rage among the Palestinians and all over the Arab world. But as far as real content is concerned, the change is minimal.

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Question: *Is the negation of the 'Right of Return' not a big change?*

Answer: Not really. In his last speech in office, on January 8, 2001, President Bill Clinton declared: "A solution...for the Palestinian refugees (will allow) them to return to a Palestinian state...Others who want to find new homes, whether in their current locations or in third countries, should be able to do so, consistent with those countries' sovereign decisions. And that includes Israel." This means that Israel alone will decide whether refugees will be allowed to enter its territory – and that is what Bush said, too. Contrary to the official translation of his letter into Hebrew, Bush said that the refugees must be settled in the Palestinian state "rather than in Israel" (the Hebrew translation said "and not in Israel". A subtle but not unimportant difference.)

On the eve of Sharon's departure for his meeting with Bush, the "Geneva Initiative" group published a letter to Sharon, demanding that the US "recognize that Israel is sovereign to decide on the entrance of Palestinian refugees into its territory." That, too, means the same.

Question: *But has not Bush endorsed now for the first time the incorporation of the settlement blocks into Israel?*

Answer: No. Clinton preceded him in this matter, too. In the same speech he endorsed the "incorporation into Israel of settlement blocks". Bush, on his part, wrote in his letter that "In the light of new realities on the ground, including already existing major Israeli population centers, it is not realistic to expect...a full and complete return" to the pre-1967 Green Line.

All American plans, going back to the Nixon years, spoke about "insubstantial changes" in the pre-1967 borders. The famous Security Council resolution 242 also did not demand that the former border be reconstituted without any change. Bush's formula continues this line. He did not spell out the extent of the border changes envisioned.

It is worthwhile remembering that the whole idea of "settlement blocks" was born years ago in the fertile brain of Yossi Beilin and was included in the "Beilin-Abu-Mazen" agreement. Beilin hoped that by this means he would disarm the opposition of the settlers, who would sacrifice the isolated settlements in order to save the major settlement blocks, where 80% of the settlers live. This hope was proven false, and Beilin's trick served only to legitimize the idea of the annexation of the blocks. The settlers did not buy the trick, because they are afraid of the precedent that would be created by removing even one settlement. They will try to prevent this by all the means available to them.

Incidentally, in the same statement published by the "Geneva Initiative" group

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before Sharon's departure, he was urged to demand from Bush "the annexation of central settlement blocks like Gush Etzion, Ma'aleh Adumim and Giv'at Ze'ev, into sovereign Israel."

There is, of course, a difference: Beilin and Clinton proposed "territorial swaps", either on a 1:1 or a less equal ratio. But it is clear that the Palestinians were asked to give up their most fertile lands in return for stretches of the Negev desert.

Question: *If so, where is the "dramatic change"?*

Answer: The drama is in the notes rather than in the melody. Clinton knew how to pour honey on his proposals, which were clearly pro-Israeli. Bush repeats these positions in a much more strident, rough and arrogant tone. He speaks about the Palestinians in the style of a military governor, just like Sharon.

Question: *If so, what will be the outcome?*

Answer: As far as the Americans are concerned, the Muslim-Arab rage against them will become even stronger, thereby increasing the motivation to hurt the Americans in Iraq and everywhere. So why did he do it?

It will be remembered that Henry Kissinger said that Israel has no foreign, but only domestic policy. That is true for the United States, too. In this matter, Bush is acting solely for his re-election. He needs the votes of the Jews and the evangelical Christians, who support the Israeli right-wing. He also needs the Jewish donations.

It is said that Bush is the most pro-Israeli American president there ever was. I think that the opposite is true. I believe that he is the most anti-Israeli American president there ever was, because the Sharon-Bush plan is blocking the way to Israeli-Palestinian peace, our only hope for a normal life.