

{JUNE 5 2004}

TO DRINK FROM THE SEA OF GAZA

Perhaps Abe Lincoln was right that you can't fool all the people all the time, but a lot of people can surely be fooled for a long, long time. Just look at Ariel Sharon.

From the start, the "Disengagement Plan" was an exercise in deceit. But the world is eager to be deceived. The world's statesmen take it seriously, it causes violent storms in Israel, the media have a ball. All this for a plan that has neither hands nor feet.

So what is the purpose of all this mayhem? Cynics might say: the mayhem itself. It puts Sharon in center stage where he can continue to play the master of events. Now the commotion has reached a climax.

The main aim of the exercise is to satisfy George Bush. The president demanded a plan which will show him doing something for peace. The more he gets sucked into the Iraqi quagmire, the more he needs to prove that he is achieving something in our country. Especially since his last baby – the "Road Map" – has died in its cradle.

Bush demanded that Sharon come up with a plan. No problem. Hocus pocus, here is a plan, with a fine promising name: "Disengagement". Speeches, meetings, a visit to the White House, exchanges of documents, state visits, emissaries, Mubarrak, Abdallah, disputes, compromises, and finally even a full-blown cabinet crisis. All this for a balloon full of hot air.

The plan claims to have three aims: to get the settlers out of Gaza, to turn the Strip over to Palestinian rule and to destroy the "terrorist infrastructure" there.

This week, Sharon himself defined the first aim in an unequivocal manner: "By the end of 2005, not a single Jew will remain in the Gaza Strip!"

A resolute, bold and strong-willed statement, as befits a great leader.

(In fact, this statement has a faintly anti-Semitic ring. If the Palestinian government wants to invite peaceful Jews to live there, why shouldn't they? Wouldn't it have been more appropriate to say: "No settler will remain in the Gaza strip"? Never mind.)

But the crucial words in the statement were "by the end of 2005." They are reminiscent of the classic Jewish joke about the Polish nobleman who threatens his

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Jew with death if he does not teach his beloved horse to read and write. The Jew asks for three years to accomplish such an arduous task. When his wife hears of it she exclaims: "But you know you cannot teach that to a horse!" The Jew calms her: "Three years is a long time. By then, either the horse or the nobleman will have died."

In our country, eighteen months are half an eternity. The situation changes by the week. Before the end of 2005, many things may happen: Bush may lose the election, catastrophe may overcome Iraq, in our country bloody events may reach such proportions as to obliterate any memory of the "plan".

Events this week made clear the central role that time plays in the "plan". Tzipi Livni, the Minister for Immigration Absorption, worked hard to engineer a compromise between Sharon and his opponents. She reinvented the egg of Columbus: the government will officially adopt the plan, but not the implementation of the plan. For some nine months, only "preparations" will be made. Not a single settlement will be evacuated. After that, the government will decide whether to evacuate any settlements at all, and, if so, which ones. (The opponents then demanded that the government continue to pour money into the settlements which are supposed to be evacuated.)

The fact that everybody treated this proposal seriously speaks for itself. A plan that is supposed to be implemented next year might as well be postponed to the next century.

But let us examine the plan on its merits, as if Sharon really intended to put it into practice. He evacuates the settlements and demolishes them, the army leaves the Gaza Strip, some kind of Palestinian administration takes over.

Will this bring peace? Will this stop the attacks?

There is no chance that this would indeed happen.

The basic principle held by all Palestinian factions is that the West Bank and the Gaza Strip constitute one integral territorial entity. This was stated explicitly in the Oslo Declaration and all the following agreements. Following this principle, Yasser Arafat has rejected all proposals of "Gaza First", unless they include at least a significant part of the West Bank (Jericho, for example.)

Sharon knows this, and therefore he added to his plan an appendage: a small area on the northern fringe of the West Bank will also be evacuated. Four small settlements are located there, and their inhabitants are very eager to leave (with generous compensation, of course). No Palestinian will take such an evacuation seriously.

There is not the slightest chance that the fighters of any of the Palestinian factions in the "liberated" Gaza Strip will look quietly on, while Sharon realizes his designs in the West Bank: the annexation of 55% of the West Bank to Israel ("settlement blocs", "essential security zones", "areas of special interest to Israel", as the army planners

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put it), with the Palestinians corralled into small enclaves. This work is already going on rapidly with the building of the monstrous “separation wall”.

The “liberated” Gaza Strip will inevitably become a base of the battle for the liberation of the West Bank. The Israeli army will react, as usual, with all its might, invading, killing, destroying and uprooting. If this does not do the job (as it did not up to now), Sharon may cut off the supply of electricity, water and food. Since the Strip will be isolated from the world, this is possible. But it will not succeed, because the world will be watching, and the Americans cannot afford this.

The military planners know this well, and have been inspired by a new plan: to get the Egyptians involved.

Brilliant, or so it seems. The Egyptian regime lives on generous American handouts – rewards for signing a peace agreement with Israel. Congress, eager to please the Sharon government, recently threatened to delay the payment of 200 million dollars to Egypt. It is therefore vital for Husni Mubarrak to show the Americans that he is Sharon’s ally.

But Mubarrak knows that he is walking a tightrope. Egypt’s connection with the Gaza Strip dates back more than 4000 years and has had many ups and downs. The Egyptians ruled the Strip after the 1948 war and do not like to be reminded of it. More than once, they tried to control the Palestinian cause, and each time it ended with their humiliation. President Gamal Abd-el-Nasser created the PLO in order to thwart Yasser Arafat, but within a few years Arafat had taken it over. President Anwar al-Sadat tried to become the guardian of the Palestinians, only to be put to shame by Menahem Begin.

If the Egyptians now try to take over Gaza and obstruct the Palestinians’ fight for the liberation of the West Bank, they will be considered collaborators and be exposed to attacks that may well spill over into Egypt itself. Hamas has powerful allies there who won’t step back from violence.

Mubarrak will be very cautious about accepting responsibility in Gaza, especially if Arafat is not involved. He knows well the curse beloved by Arafat: “Go and drink from the sea of Gaza!”

Therefore, this whole plan is standing on its head. It has no basis in reality. All in all, it is a recipe for the continuation of the war in another form.

But no need to worry. Sharon is not really serious about it. He is sure that before the time comes for the evacuation of even a single settlement, either the horse will die or the Polish nobleman will forget all about it.