

{OCTOBER 9 2004}

DON'T BELIEVE A WORD

When Ariel Sharon announced his plan for “unilateral disengagement”, the media reported that the Peace Now movement was preparing a big public campaign in support. The Prime Minister’s office asked them to desist, fearing that such a campaign would cause the extreme right to oppose it.

Peace Now was not the only “leftist” group that waxed enthusiastic about the plan. The chiefs of the Labor Party declared that it was really their own plan and that, therefore, it was their duty to join the government and help Sharon to implement it.

I was one of the very few who immediately raised their voice against the plan. I argued (<http://www.gush-shalom.org/archives/article282.html>)

that it was really a right-wing plan for annexing most of the West Bank, burying the peace process and deceiving public opinion in Israel and abroad.

I was certain of this, because I know Sharon. I have been watching the man for 50 years and have written three biographical essays about him. I know what he thinks and I know how he operates.

Now Dov Weisglass has confirmed everything I said and more. In an interview with Haaretz, he stated that the sole aim of the plan was to “freeze” the peace process. The real purpose of the “disengagement” is to block negotiations with the Palestinians for dozens of years and to prevent any discussion about the West Bank, while at the same time extending the Israeli settlements in a way that will put an end to any possibility of a future Palestinian state.

Dov Weisglass is not just anybody. He reminds one of the “eminence grise” (“gray cardinal”), the secretary of Cardinal Richelieu, the Prime Minister of France 400 years ago. It was said at the time that it was the secretary who was really in charge behind the scenes.

Weisglass has been the legal advisor and a close personal friend of Sharon for decades. He is Sharon’s special emissary for delicate missions, the man who can twist

Condoleezza Rice around his little finger. In Sharon's menagerie, he is the fox.

His frank statement is the final word. It puts to shame not only the simple souls of Peace Now and the less simple souls like Shimon Peres & Co. of the Labor Party, but also George Bush and the other world leaders who for months have taken this piece of deceit as a serious peace plan. (Poor Colin Powell called it "historic".)

WEISGLASS' disclosure was vying for media attention with the "stretcher case" – a story that also reveals Sharon's methods. It might have been funny, if it did not threaten such tragic results.

Sharon wants to destroy UNRWA, the special United Nations Relief and Works Agency that moderates the misery of the four millions of Palestinian refugees. It is a big organization with some 25 thousand employees, including teachers, social workers and physicians, almost all of them, of course, Palestinians. It provides the refugees with food, education, health services and, in case of need, a roof over their head. Without it, the refugees would long ago have descended into an abyss of hunger and despair. At present, while our army is destroying whole Gaza neighborhoods and their infrastructure, UNRWA is providing food, tents and medical care to needy Palestinians who are not refugees.

The very existence of this organization disturbs Sharon and his generals, who want to break the resistance of the Palestinians by turning their life into hell. After working systematically to smash the Palestinian National Authority, they are now trying to crush UNRWA. As reported in the media, Sharon ordered his generals to supply the Foreign Office's propaganda department with secret army photos, in order to prove that UNRWA cooperates with the "terror organizations".

The next day, all the Israeli TV channels displayed aerial reconnaissance photos showing a Qassam rocket launcher being loaded into an UNRWA ambulance. That was the beginning of a wild campaign against the organization. Israeli diplomats in New York demanded that the Danish UNRWA director, Peter Hansen, be fired.

Two days later, the whole thing came apart. UNRWA claimed that the man in the picture was not carrying a rocket launcher but a stretcher. The generals first issued a denial, then stuttered, then half-heartedly admitted that, perhaps, a deplorable mistake had occurred: the professional analysts in the army intelligence department, lowly sergeants or second lieutenants, may have misinterpreted the pictures.

This answer needs investigating. Did the analysts lie or did they believe what they said? Each possibility is worse than the other.

If the experts lied, they did nothing unusual. It can be said that they did what intelligence people do all over the world: supply their bosses with the information they

want to hear. Bush wants to attack Iraq? The CIA provides information about Saddam's WMDs. Sharon wants to destroy UNRWA? Army intelligence provides photos of Hansen's rocket launchers.

Fifty years ago, when foreign correspondents asked me about the credibility of official IDF statements, I used to answer that our army does not lie. One should believe its communiqués, without a good reason to the contrary. Those days are long passed. When I am asked the same question nowadays, I advise not to believe a single word of army announcements, without good reason to the contrary.

So it is not surprising that army intelligence is lying. In countless appearances before the cabinet and the Knesset foreign-and-security committee, the intelligence chiefs have peddled outright lies and false assessments. That's nothing new.

But there is also the possibility that the analysts did believe that they were providing accurate information. And that is even more frightening.

One does not have to be an expert to see that the man in the photo is not carrying a rocket launcher. No one carries a heavy object in one hand like the person in the photo. Clearly, what he is carrying is light. A second glance also shows that, without doubt, it is indeed a stretcher. It looks like a stretcher and the man is carrying it like a stretcher. ("If it walks like a duck and squawks like a duck...")

If the experts made a mistake, why is that so awful? It's awful because the air force has often hit "rocket launcher squads" identified as such by the same photo analysts, a finding that is transmitted within seconds and that results in death within seconds. Afterwards the army spokesmen announce with great satisfaction that another deadly squad has been "eliminated". How many human beings, children including, have been killed by this kind of "certain identification"?

Even worse, this particular "mistake" practically invites soldiers to shoot at ambulances carrying the wounded.

I have met Peter Hansen only once, at a UN conference about the refugees. He struck me as a decent and principled person. I hope he will stay in his post .

ONE case of killing caused by "certain identification" this week should have shocked the world.

Iman Alhamas, a 13-year old girl from Rafah, was on her way to school, following the same route she took every day. Suddenly deadly fire enveloped her. The doctors extracted 20 bullets from her body. Since not every bullet hits its target and some pass right through, it may be assumed that at least 100 bullets were fired at her from several army positions – one hundred bullets for one little girl. In her bag, only schoolbooks were found.

The army spokesmen issued the standard mendacious statement: the girl had entered a “forbidden zone”, the soldiers took her for a “terrorist”, the bag looked as if it contained explosives, etc. etc.

So what happened in reality?

The simplest explanation is that the soldiers shot as if they were at a shooting range as revenge for the two children killed by a Quassam rocket in the Israeli town Sderot. But that is not easy to believe.

Another explanation, no less alarming, is that the soldiers are in a perpetual state of panic. I have personally seen soldiers in panic shooting at everything that moves. Perhaps this is what happened here, too: the girl threw her bag away and started to flee after a warning shot was fired, and the soldiers, instead of shooting at the bag, shot at her.

THE skeptical attitude of the Israeli public towards announcements of the security apparatus caused another tragedy this week.

On the eve of the Jewish New Year, the General Security Service advised the public not to cross into Sinai because of urgent security warnings. The people voted non-confidence with their feet. In spite of the repeated warnings, tens of thousands spent the Jewish holiday season there. They believed that the warning was politically motivated and that, anyhow, if the threat were serious, the authorities would have closed the border.

This time, however, the warnings were justified. Many dozens were killed and wounded in mass attacks.

No Palestinian organization would have thought of provoking the Egyptian government. Therefore, it appears that something new has happened.

We have warned many times that the young Arab and Muslim generation in the world will not stand aside forever while the TV brings reports every day that show how the Arab nation is humiliated. The apathy of the Arab and Muslim governments towards the events in the occupied Palestinian territories looks to them like humiliating cowardice or rank treason.

The mistreatment of the Palestinian people by Sharon and his predecessors has created an explosive situation. The invasion of Iraq by Bush has provided the spark. An Arab-Muslim resistance movement is coming into being, a resistance that sees no difference between Iraq and Palestine, between Israel, the US and the Arab governments.

That, it seems, is the message of Taba.