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THE BOSS HAS GONE CRAZY

When the fruit sellers at the Tel Aviv market shout “the boss has gone crazy!” they mean that they are selling their merchandise at ridiculously low prices.

In the world’s capitals, a similar cry is now being heard: “The boss has gone crazy!” - but it is not about the price of tomatoes. It refers to the new situation, after the reelection of George W. Bush for four more years.

In many places, Bush is seen as a crazy cowboy, the kind who rides into town shooting in all directions. He has attacked Afghanistan. He has attacked Iraq. His neo-con handlers want to attack Syria and Iran in the next phase. They want to establish subservient regimes everywhere (“promoting democracy in the Middle East”), station permanent American garrisons in the region and control the world’s oil market, and - last but not least - help Ariel Sharon to fulfil his plans.

Now, in his second term of office, Bush can do pretty much as he pleases.

The Middle Eastern rulers have drawn this conclusion with impressive speed. Every one of them rushed for cover in the nearest political cave, until the danger is over.

The Syrian ruler, Bashar Assad, has started a peace offensive, to the sound of a hundred angelic trumpets.

The Egyptian ruler, Husni Mubarrak, has suddenly discovered that Sharon is his long-lost brother, a man of peace from the cradle onwards. He now presents himself as Bush’s viceroy in the Middle East.

The Jordanian ruler, King Abdallah II, is making similar noises (after taking the opportunity to clip the wings of his younger brother.)

The rulers of Iran, the tough Ayatullahs, executed a hasty withdrawal and agreed to give up their nuclear program.

And the Palestinians are uniting behind Abu Mazen, who is favored by President Bush.

Optimism has a field day. The winds of hope are blowing throughout the region.

Diplomats from all over the world are arriving for sudden visits hoping to capitalize on the expected success, like bees descending on flowers. International commentators, prophets who have an uncanny ability to foresee the past, talk about the Middle Eastern Spring.

(This, by the way, is a geographical misconception. Spring is the symbol of hope in Europe, where nature awakens after the cold, hard winter. In our region, the symbol of hope is autumn, when nature awakens after the hot, dry summer.)

Have all these hopes any substance?

One can examine, for example, the Syrian hope. Assad Jr. is proposing negotiations without preconditions. A seductive offer. Will Sharon accept it?

Once, in the throes of a political debate in the Knesset, I addressed the Prime Minister, Golda Meir: "It seems to me that you are faced with a fateful decision: whether not to give the West Bank back to King Hussein or not to give it back to the Palestinians." Today Sharon is faced with a similar dilemma: what to do first not to give the Golan back to the Syrians or not to give back the West Bank to the Palestinians?

Like his predecessor, Ehud Barak, Sharon would not dream of giving the Golan back. Even if he had been ready to do this (as he is not), he would not dare to propose the evacuation of the dozens of settlements there.

In his autobiography, ex-President Bill Clinton recounts what happened last time Syrian-Israeli peace was placed on the agenda. Ehud Barak, the then Prime Minister, requested Clinton to call a Syrian-Israeli conference. Clinton, eager to garner an international success, readily agreed. He was pleasantly surprised when Assad Sr. gave up all his former demands (i.e. "to dangle his feet in the Sea of Galilee") and agreed to all the Israeli demands. Then, at the very last moment, when everything was ready for signing, Barak told Clinton that on second thoughts he had decided to call the whole thing off.

Now there is no Clinton around, and Sharon has no need to pretend. He remarked contemptuously that Assad talks about peace only because of the American pressure. (So what? Isn't this the perfect opportunity to achieve peace?)

Sharon rejected the Syrian offer out of hand. Assad offers peace without preconditions? Good, but we have some of our own: first of all, he must drive all the leaders of the Palestinian organizations out of Damascus and disarm Hizbullah in Lebanon. That means that Assad must give up every single one of the few cards he holds, before negotiations can even begin. One has to be pretty naive to believe that then Sharon would then give up even one single settlement. The more so since Bush has given a clear-cut order: don't talk with the Syrians, don't make it difficult for me to attack them if I decide to do so.

Therefore, all the hope is now concentrated on the Palestinian front. If Abu Mazen is elected President of the Palestinian Authority next month, will real negotiations start?

It doesn't look that way. Sharon has indeed agreed to withdraw the army from the towns on election day but not before. In the meantime, Sharon's offensive goes on relentlessly: this week another "targeted assassination" was attempted (it failed), practically every day Palestinians (including children) are being killed, the systematic humiliation at the roadblocks goes on, the building of the infamous wall continues, settlers are uprooting Palestinian olive groves without hindrance. One of the candidates for president, left-leaning Mustapha Barghouti (a distant relative of Marwan) was stopped at a checkpoint and severely beaten by the soldiers.

However, the real question is not whether there is a temporary easing of restrictions, as a gesture towards Abu Mazen (and, more importantly, towards Bush), but whether Sharon is ready to enter genuine negotiations for the establishment of a real Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital and a return to the pre-1967 Green Line, more or less. There is no indication of that.

True, Shimon Peres declares that he is going to join the government in order to facilitate the Gaza "disengagement, and that immediately afterwards he will push for a solution for the West Bank. But those are empty words, calculated to silence his opponents in his own party. After all, when he served as a minister in Sharon's previous government, he did practically nothing for peace. Now, when he crawls back into the government and everybody knows that he wants to stay there whatever happens, he will achieve even less.

In the new government, Sharon can do what he wants. If he wants to, he can implement the "disengagement plan". If he wants to, he can annex most of the West Bank.

The boss has gone crazy? The last thing he will do is to put pressure on Sharon.

AVNERY | SHARON'S SKIN AND BUSH'S SPOTS