

{APRIL 16 2005}

THE 100 DAYS OF ABU MAZEN

Next Saturday, 100 days since Abu Mazen (Mahmud Abbas) assumed the office of President of the Palestinian National Authority, Jews will celebrate Passover, in memory of the Exodus from Egypt – one of the great stories in human annals.

According to the story (Exodus 5), Pharaoh ordered the Children of Israel to produce bricks from straw, but did not provide the straw. “And the Children of Israel came and cried unto Pharaoh, saying: Wherefore dealest thou with thy servants? There is no straw given unto thy servants, and they say to us: Make brick!”

Abu Mazen might voice the same complaint. He is being asked to fulfill the task he has taken upon himself, without getting the minimum necessary to do so.

After 100 days, what does Abu Mazen’s balance sheet look like?

In the positive column, there appear some impressive achievements.

First of all, the very existence of his regime. That is a striking achievement by itself, which is being ignored because people have become so used to it.

The sudden (and still unexplained) death of Yasser Arafat could have caused chaos. Instead, there was an astonishingly smooth transition to the new regime and democratic elections took place without violent incidents. Very few peoples have managed to do that after the death of the Father of the Nation. The entire Palestinian public must be given credit for this. It understood the gravity of the hour and united behind the successor.

Second, the cease-fire. That is an impressive achievement, too. The armed Palestinian organizations (“resistance groups” or “terrorist organizations”, according to taste) agreed to a cease-fire vis-a-vis Israel, in spite of the fact that Israel did not declare an official cease-fire vis-a-vis them. True, the informal agreement is being violated here and there, sometimes by the Israelis, sometimes by the Palestinians, but all in all it is honored much more than could have been expected.

This is not the result of the weakness of the armed factions. On the contrary, it is

possible only because the Palestinians have recovered their self-respect. In the four years of the second Intifada, they have shown they have hundreds and thousands of fighters ready to sacrifice their lives. They have improvised arms, like the mortars and Qassam missiles, to which the Israeli army has not yet found an answer. In these circumstances, the cease-fire is not seen as humiliating.

(The Israeli side accuses the organizations of using the cease-fire for rearming. Of course. That is the nature of any temporary cease-fire: both sides use it to prepare for the resumption of the fighting.)

Third, unification. The agreement of Hamas to join the Palestinian Authority (and perhaps also the PLO) and take part in the elections is a very important achievement. The birth of a national contract augurs well for the future Palestinian state - especially as it happens in an intense national liberation struggle.

Fourth: the change in the American attitude towards the Palestinian people. This should, perhaps, be put on top of the list. Up to now, the American attitude towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was at least 100% in favor of the government of Israel; now there is a shift in favor of the Palestinians. American support for the Israeli government has sunk to only 90%, or perhaps as low as 80%.

Abu Mazen's personality must be credited for a considerable part of these achievements. Yasser Arafat, the leader of the fight for liberation, was a forceful, colorful, theatrical personality, who attracted blind admiration and burning hatred. Nearly everyone around the world knew the man in khaki with the keffiyeh headdress. Abu Mazen is almost the exact opposite: an introverted, moderate person without colorful mannerisms. When I got to know him first, some 22 years ago in Tunis, he was already wearing a business suit and tie. He does not arouse opposition. He fights for his convictions without much ado.

Perhaps the negative column for Abu Mazen derives also from these traits.

Arafat was a commander. Abu Mazen is an educator.

Arafat, too, preferred agreement to compulsion. That comes from ancient Arab wisdom, the principle of "Ijma". Discussion continues until a general consensus is achieved, with every single participant agreeing. For Abu Mazen, that is essential.

The entire world demands that he carry out "reforms". It is not quite clear why it should concern the world or the President of the United States how the Palestinians conduct their affairs and how many security services they have. (Arafat deliberately established several armed services, in order to prevent the concentration of armed power in the hands of any single person who might be tempted to carry out a coup-d'etat.)

Abu Mazen is expected to consolidate the armed organizations into three services.

That is easy to do on paper, but difficult to carry out. There are many commanders, most of them with subordinates who are fiercely loyal to them. None of them is looking for an opportunity to resign.

In any case, it is difficult to carry out the reforms asked for. In every Arab society, and especially in Palestinian society, the hamulah, or extended family, is hugely important. Any attempt to ignore it in the implementation of reforms will meet with stiff resistance. Abu Mazen must move cautiously, slowly, trying to build consent. That is a prolonged process, which aims for durable rather than quick results.

But the most serious failure of Abu Mazen, in the eyes of his people, is on the national level: in the first 100 days he has not obtained one single significant concession, neither from Israel nor from the US.

Bush does really want to help him. He praises him publicly, rejects Sharon's efforts to belittle him, sends him respected emissaries. But nothing has changed on the ground: the Israeli occupation has not been eased, the daily humiliations at the checkpoints go on, and so does the building of the wall. Not one single "outpost" has been removed, the settlements are being expanded. The Israeli army carries on in the West Bank as if nothing has happened, killing here and arresting there. There is no significant movement towards the release of prisoners. Israelis continue addressing the Palestinians in the same overbearing, humiliating tone used by military governors towards their subjects.

When Bush talks about a "Palestinian state with temporary borders", every Palestinian understands that this means the permanent occupation of most of the West Bank. Sharon's "redeployment" looks to them like a plan to turn the Gaza Strip into one huge prison, cut off from the world and the West Bank.

Sooner or later, the Palestinian public is going to ask Abu Mazen: Are these the fruits of the cease-fire? Is this the value of American promissory notes?

There must be no illusion about it: this is exactly what Sharon is hoping for.

For him, the sympathy Bush holds for Abu Mazen presents a great danger. It is very uncomfortable for him to share American favors with a Palestinian leader. Any wavering in Washington's position of total support for the Israeli government turns on a red light in Jerusalem.

Sharon is too shrewd to attack Abu Mazen frontally. That would infuriate Bush. Therefore, the pitch is: Abu Mazen is a good person, but weak. His regime is collapsing. He is lost.

Several provocations have been designed to bring about violent reactions, so as to expose Abu Mazen's impotence. One was the announcement about the building of 3500 new housing units in Ma'aleh Adumim settlement. The same goes for the incidents in

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which Palestinians are killed, without anybody finding it necessary to punish those responsible or to apologize for the violation of the cease-fire.

For the time being, it has not succeeded. Bush needs Abu Mazen no less than Abu Mazen needs Bush. The American president must prove to his public that his military adventures have created a new, free and democratic Middle East. Since the situation in Iraq is shrouded in doubt, Abu Mazen's democratic regime is the only example he can boast of (even if it is not clear what part he played in this). Abu Mazen's collapse would be a big loss for Bush.

Therefore, on the 100 th day of Abu Mazen, the accounts are still not balanced. Like the Children of Israel, he must produce bricks without getting any straw.

But in the biblical story, there is a happy end: the Children of Israel were delivered from bondage. One way or another, that will happen to the Palestinians, too.