

{OCTOBER 29, 2005}

# ABBAS AND THE LAME DUCK

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**A** twenty-minute drive is all that separates the Israeli Prime Minister's office in Jerusalem from that of the Palestinian President in Ramallah. But for all practical purposes, the Muqata'ah in Ramallah might as well be on the moon. The day before yesterday, Ariel Sharon declared for the who-knows-how-many-th time, that he had cancelled his planned meeting with Mahmoud Abbas. The reason: Abbas "is not doing anything against terrorism". A routine pretext, but it seems that this time the act itself is not mere routine.

The long campaign for the elimination of Mahmoud Abbas is entering its final phase.

Much to the regret of Sharon & Co., Abbas cannot be "eliminated" the usual way, as were Sheikh Ahmad Yassin and many other Palestinian leaders. In the case of Abbas, it is not even allowed to use the word "elimination" – an official term of the Israeli army, taken straight from the Mafia lexicon.

The ascent of Abbas after the elimination of Yassir Arafat – still shrouded in mystery – turned on a red light in Sharon's office. After all, his plans are all based on the slogan "There is Nobody to Talk With". Abbas, on the other hand, looks to the world, and even to a significant part of the Israeli public – like a Palestinian leader eminently fit to talk with. Worse, he looks that way to President Bush too.

That made a cautious approach necessary. Carefully concealing his anger, Sharon shook hands with Abbas in Aqaba, in the presence of Bush. He saw, with growing concern, how the Palestinian leader was received in the White House and heard Bush praise the democratic elections held by the Palestinians. There was a growing danger that the Americans would realize an old nightmare of Israeli governments: an "imposed peace" that would compel Israel to return more or less to the pre-1967 border.

Therefore, Sharon adopted a cautious tactic: gain time, wait for a change of circumstances, and in the meantime be content with sticking needles into Abbas' effigy. It was impossible to launch a campaign of demonization against him, as had been done to Arafat, with the full participation of all the Israeli and world Jewish media. But in all the media, a daily message was planted: Abbas is a wet rag, Abbas is

not worth anything, Abbas is not able to destroy the “terror infrastructure”, it’s quite useless to talk with him.

This week, the style was sharpened. No more pity for poor Abbas, doing his best and failing, but an outright attack on him. Abbas, it is being said, doesn’t really want to put an end to terrorism. The news pages of all newspapers, from Maariv to Haaretz, were mobilized for this campaign. The radio and television networks joined in with enthusiasm.

At the same time, the violent confrontation broke out again with full force.

Who started it? Depends who is asked. As always, each side declares that the new round began with an atrocity from the other side. If one wants to, one can go back 120 years, to the first stone thrown by a Palestinian shepherd at the first Jewish settler – or to the first blow struck by the first Jewish settler on the head of a Palestinian shepherd who had led his goats onto his field.

As a matter of fact, the confrontation has not stopped for a moment. The Palestinians did indeed declare a Tahidiya (“calm”), but that was only an agreement among themselves. The Israeli army was no party to it and continued with great vigor entering Palestinian towns and villages, arresting “wanted” militants and killing some of them, here and there.

The new round started with the killing of Luay Sa’adi, a militant of the Islamic Jihad in the Tulkarm area, who had already spent five of his 25 years in Israeli prisons. The army described him as a very senior commander, a huge “ticking bomb”. The Jihad took up this ludicrous assertion with alacrity, because it justified a major retaliation. In private, Palestinians said that he was just a local activist.

Either way: when Sharon, between breakfast and lunch, gave his assent to the execution, he knew that he was also condemning some Israelis to death – since it was certain that the Jihad would respond with an act of revenge. There is no escape from the conclusion that that was indeed the purpose of the action.

It was confirmed with great speed. A Jihadist from a close-by Palestinian village carried out a suicide bombing in the fruit market of the Israeli town Hadera, five Israelis were murdered. (In the terminology used by all Israeli media, as dictated from above, Israelis are always “murdered”, while Arabs “find their death”, or, at most, are “killed”.) The village of the suicide bomber is separated from Hadera by the high Separation Wall, but it seems that this did not hinder him. Before his death, he was videoed declaring that he was taking revenge for the killing of Sa’adi – disproving the army’s contention that the bombing had been prepared before the killing and had nothing to do with it.

As if it had only been waiting for this outrage, the army went immediately into well-

planned action. A choking general blockade was imposed on the northern West Bank. Towns and villages all over the West Bank were cut off again, sometimes only hours after the roadblocks around them had been removed at the insistence of Condoleezza Rice. A general man-hunt against Jihad activists was started, with a broad hint that the turn of Hamas and Fatah activists would not be far behind.

In the Gaza Strip, a parallel cycle started. Out of solidarity with the West Bank comrades, some Qassam rockets were fired at Israeli localities, without hitting anyone. The response was prepared in advance: the Army cut the Strip off from all contact with the world, all passages were closed. The Strip was shelled and bombed from land, air and sea. Helicopter missiles killed Jihad activist Shadi Muhanna together with his assistant and four passersby, including a boy – an act that may well bring Chief-of-Staff Dan Halutz another step closer to the International Criminal Court in The Hague. Revenge is assured, and so is the revenge for the revenge.

While all over the world praise is heaped on the “disengagement” and on Sharon, the Man of Peace, he has launched a general offensive for the annexation of most of the West Bank.

Last week, all over the Palestinian territories, the miserable living conditions were made even worse. That looks like collective punishment, which is forbidden by the Fourth Geneva Convention. But in reality, it was something worse: the aim is to sow despair among the Palestinians, bring them to their knees, compel them to accept Sharon’s diktat – to be content with 42% of the West Bank (11% of pre-1948 Palestine) in several enclaves – and, ultimately, to convince them to emigrate altogether.

Sharon behaves like a bullfighter, sticking his bandilleras between the shoulders of the bull in order to enrage and bait him, till he lashes out in all directions.

While attention is diverted by the widespread military action, the settlements are being enlarged at a feverish pace, and new settlements are springing up. The building of the Wall continues vigorously, regardless of the Hadera bombing which showed that its security value is doubtful. The dismantling of the hundred “outposts” that were put up after 2001, as demanded by the Road Map, is not even on the agenda. All the army did was to remove five new “outposts” set up this week, with much mutual shoving and hitting, without using tear gas, salt or rubber bullets or stun grenades, which are seemingly reserved for Israeli peace activists.

The demand by the Quartet emissary, James Wolfensohn, to open the absolutely vital passage between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, was treated with contempt. Since Wolfensohn is highly regarded by Bush and Condoleezza Rice, this has a special significance.

Sharon’s people are closely following events in Washington. They know that Bush is

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in deep trouble and is fast becoming a Lame Duck. Condi, the duckling, is limping along behind him.

For Sharon, that is a great relief. At long last, he can now stop praising Abbas and start to bury him.