

Finger After Finger: Ariel's Sharon's grand design to take over most of the West Bank

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Seven words uttered by President Bush in Brussels have not been paid the attention they deserve.

He called for the establishment of “a democratic Palestinian state with territorial contiguity” in the West Bank, and then added: “A state on scattered territories will not work.”

It is worthwhile to ponder these words. Who did he point the finger at? Why did he say this in Brussels, of all places?

Nobody warns of a danger without a reason. If Bush said what he said, it means that he believes that someone is causing this danger.

Just who might that be?

For years now I have been warning that this is the intention of Ariel Sharon, the basis of the whole settlement enterprise planned and set up by him. The lay-out of the settlements on the West Bank map is designed to cut the territory up from North to South and from West to East, in order to forestall any possibility of establishing a really viable and contiguous Palestinian state, a state like any other.

If the settlement blocs that have been created are annexed to Israel, the Palestinian territory will be sliced up into a number of enclaves – perhaps four, perhaps six. The Gaza Strip, an isolated ghetto by itself, will be another enclave. Each enclave will be surrounded by settlements and military installations, and all of them will be cut off from the world outside.

The American intelligence agencies are familiar with this picture, of course. They can see it with their satellites. But that did not deter President Bush from promising Sharon last year that Israeli “population centers” in the West Bank will be annexed to Israel. These “population centers” are the very same settlement blocs that were defined by the US in the past as “illegal” and “an obstacle to peace”. During the presidency of the first President Bush, the American administration even decided to deduct the costs of new settlement projects from the financial benefits accorded to Israel.

So why did the second Bush suddenly make a declaration whose practical meaning is that some of these settlement blocs must be dismantled? And why did he make it in Brussels?

It is clear that he wanted to gain favor with his European hosts. The European Union opposes the annexation of West Bank territory to Israel. Bush said what he said in order to

reduce his differences with Europe.

So he said it. And what is happening on the ground in the meantime?

Last Sunday the Israeli government decided for the second time to implement the disengagement plan, a decision that was hailed by the media as “historic”. With all the hullabaloo, hardly any attention was paid to a second resolution adopted at the same meeting: to continue building the wall in the West Bank.

At first sight, that is a routine decision. After all, the government argues that this is nothing but a “security fence”. It does indeed have a certain security function, and Israeli public opinion accepts it as such. But by now, informed people must know that this wall is intended as the future border of Israel. Therefore, this week all government spokespersons took pains to stress that the new path of the wall cuts off only 7-8% of the West Bank.

The word “only” deserves attention. President Bill Clinton’s last peace plan spoke about the annexation of 3-4% of the West Bank to Israel, in return for the transfer of 1% of Israeli territory to the Palestinian state. Seven percent of the territory of the Federal Republic of Germany is much more than the whole state of Saxony. Seven percent of the territory of the United States of America is more than the whole giant state of Texas. (Imagine: Mexico conquers Texas, builds a wall between it and the rest of the US and fills it with Mexican settlements.)

But the percentage game is misleading. It is not only the size of the territory that is important, but also its location.

In this respect, the controversy between Israel and the US remains. It concerns mainly two places, where the path of the wall causes the dismemberment of the West Bank. If the wall is to include the settlement town of Ariel, it will send a finger deep into the West Bank. This finger will connect with a second one, coming from the opposite direction – the two fingers together will cut through the whole width of the West Bank south of Nablus. Another finger will extend from Jerusalem to the enlarged Ma’aleh Adumim settlement bloc, also cutting practically the full width of the West Bank.

The Americans do not yet agree. So Sharon is using one of his typical methods: in those two places he leaves a gap in the wall. He will build there in due course, after using a future opportunity to wrap President Bush – so to say – around his little finger.

But the percentage account is also wrong in another respect. Nowadays one speaks only about the wall that will separate the West Bank from Israel proper. Nobody is talking now of the “Eastern” wall.

It is no secret that Sharon plans to build this wall in order to complete the encirclement of the West Bank and cut it off from the Jordan valley and the Dead Sea shore. That is a big slice of territory, about 20% of the West Bank, and would cut the West Bank off from any contact with the world. Sharon knows that he cannot build this wall at the moment, because of the opposition of the US and the whole world. Also, there is no budget for it. Therefore, he is leaving it for the future.

The government decision does formally include the southern border of the West Bank, where the planned path of the wall runs almost completely along the Green Line. That looks

really nice. But this, too, contains a trick: Sharon does not intend to build this part of the wall in the near future. He is postponing it for another time - and then he will propose a different path altogether, including a finger thrust deeply into Palestinian territory, so as to annex the South Hebron settlement bloc, up to Kiryat Arba.

By way of deception shalt thou build settlements.

In the meantime, Sharon is keeping himself occupied with building on the 7% of the territory that has been approved by the government decision. All this area between the wall and the Green Line - the territory already annexed in practice - is being filled with new settlements. Among others:

O A new town called Gevaoth that is to be built west of Bethlehem, in what is called the "Etzion Bloc".

That is a mendacious name: the original Etzion Bloc consisted of a small group of settlements near the Green Line. It was occupied by the Arabs in the 1948 war and re-conquered by Israel in 1967, when the former settlements were also re-built. But then a whole new town (Efrata) was added to the East, and beyond that a number of new settlements, until the original few settlements had expanded into a massive settlement bloc almost surrounding Bethlehem. Now Sharon is going to fill it with even more settlers.

- A big new settlement called "North Tsufim" that is to be built north of Qalqilia. This, too, will reach the proportions of a town.
- Giant housing projects, that will be set up in order to connect the Ma'aleh Adumim bloc to Jerusalem, and just about reach the Jordan river.

Also in the Jerusalem Area, the new (Labor) Minister for Housing, Yitzhak Herzog, promises to build big housing projects from Har Homa to Ma'aleh Adumim, while another one is going to be built east of a-Ram. The aim is to cut Jerusalem off completely from the West Bank.

All this is happening while Israel and the world are waxing lyrical about the "disengagement" plan - which, in essence, is nothing but a plan to consolidate the Gaza strip as one of the enclaves in "a state of scattered territories". (The Gaza Strip constitutes only 6% of the occupied territories.)

The Labor party is a full partner in this scheme.

As far as Sharon is concerned, the disengagement plan plays with the dismantling of some small settlements in a remote corner of the occupied territories for the fulfillment of his grand design to take over most of the West Bank.

Now President Bush has declared that he does not accept this design. His European hosts smiled politely. Perhaps they believed him, and then, maybe they did not.

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