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Palestine

A destructive fury

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Israel today resembles a bus driven by a crazed drunk at 100 miles an hour. This bus crushes everything in its path, does not stop at any red lights and plunges straight into the abyss. We are witnessing a destructive and murderous fury that knows no limits.

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Ambulances and medical teams are fired on, as are churches and mosques, diplomatic convoys and journalists. US or European citizens who come to see at first hand the situation in the occupied territories are deported as if they were hooligans - and the same treatment is meted out to a European Union ministerial delegation. Men are killed by being shot through the head (at least six in Ramallah), entire streets are destroyed by shelling and missiles, with the inhabitants in their houses. Torture is practiced in the detention camps where thousands of civilians have been rounded up. How many deaths? 2,000? More?

In the refugee camp at Jenin, in any case, there has been a veritable massacre, like that in Kibye in 1953, like in Sabra and Chatilla in 1982. All carried out by Sharon.

What lies behind this destructive madness? As far as the government is concerned, it is the result of an ideology that mixes ultra-nationalism, hatred of Arabs and messianic fundamentalism (the presence of Shimon Peres only confirms the confusion of those elements in international social democracy who believed the Israeli Labour Party were anything other than national socialists). Their war is a holy war for Eretz Israel, cleansed of Arabs. As far as the Israeli people are concerned, and in particular those hundreds of thousands of men and women who, for a time, supported the peace process, it has - very easily, it should be said - been mystified by the discourse of Ehud Barak, who stated that at Camp David he had succeeded in proving the Palestinians never wanted peace with Israel, and in fact was only engaged in a subtle manoeuvre to destroy Israel. Sharon's victory was the corollary of such an argument.

It should be said and repeated: this is not a war between Israel and the Palestinians, for a war supposes two armies confronting each other, even if their forces are sometimes very unequal. Nor is it an anti-terrorist operation, because you don't dismantle networks with 30,000 soldiers, more than a thousand tanks, combat helicopters and fighter jets. What is it all about then? A punitive operation combined with a vast operation of pacification, two concepts which will be immediately familiar to all those who have experienced or studied colonialism.

The punitive operation is not a reaction to suicide bombings (it began at the end of September, well before the first such bombings), but rather to the refusal by the Palestinians and their national leadership to accept the diktats of Ehud Barak at Camp David in July 2000. To the generous offer of the Palestinians to content themselves with 22% of their historic homeland, Ehud Barak had responded with the demand to annex some 20% of Palestinian territory, to maintain a significant number of settlements and above all to impose Jewish sovereignty on the Haram al-sharif. [1] A proposal as absurd as it was unacceptable, it was seen by the Palestinians as an Israeli rejection of their historic compromise and more generally of their will for coexistence based on the realisation of UN resolutions and the principles of law.

However, the essence of the Israeli aggression is not the punitive aspect, but pacification: it is about bringing a whole people to its knees, to make it capitulate and accept the Sharon plan. For, contrary to what is often thought, Sharon has a plan: to enclose the Palestinians in the zones they inhabit, transform them into veritable Bantustans, put the finishing touches to the process of settlement in the remainder of the occupied territories (50-60%) and annex them to Israel. These Bantustans (or 'cantons' as Sharon calls them) would be governed by collaborators, put in position

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after the neutralisation of Yasser Arafat and the destruction of the Palestinian authority.

A crazy objective, doomed to failure because of the obstinacy of the Palestinian people who, despite thousands of deaths and the destruction of the infrastructures of their society, show absolutely no sign of capitulation. On the contrary, with the determination of those who have nothing more to lose the women and men of the West Bank and Gaza Strip continue to heroically resist Israeli violence.

That is why the murderous violence of Sharon and the Israeli army will not stop until the Palestinians surrender or another force which is still more determined than that of the far right government which leads Israel obliges it to cease its aggression, begin a withdrawal from the occupied territories and dismantle the settlements built in those territories.

More than 10 years ago the former Israeli chief of staff, general Dan Shomron, said that the Israeli army, before deciding on what methods to employ to break the Palestinian popular movement, should take into consideration two factors: possible international pressure and the existence of a strong internal opposition. These two factors, said the general, fixed the limits of the means of repression available to the army of occupation. These two factors have been cruelly lacking in the course of the last 18 months.

International pressure does not go beyond verbal reproaches and vague threats in the case of Europe; while since September 11 the US has given a green light to what is presented as the front line defence in the world crusade against terrorism. As for Israeli society, apart from a peace movement which is slowly waking up from a more or less active collaboration with the terrorist policies of Barak and then Sharon, it is for the moment united behind its government of national unity and its army, and genuinely believes that it is 'them or us', and that it is imperative to return to the behaviour and reflexes of the 1950s when Israel was entirely mobilised in its war against the Arab world. As if nothing had happened since the war of 1973, neither the coming of Sadat, nor the peace with Egypt, nor the Madrid Conference, nor the Oslo process, nor peace with Jordan nor the Saudi plan. A schizophrenic and murderous, but also suicidal, psychosis.

The Geneva conventions are trampled underfoot, the laws of war are violated, the norms of international civility swept aside. With complete impunity: no serious sanction has been taken by the European states. As for the US, they support Sharon, who gives an example of how to lead the crusade of the civilised world against barbarism.

Certainly, civil societies have woken up, from Rabat where 2 million people demonstrated their solidarity with the Palestinians to Berkeley, California, from Brussels where more than 15,000 demonstrated against war crimes to Noumea in New Caledonia. The European Parliament reflected this awakening in calling for economic sanctions against Israel, as did President Mubarak in recalling his ambassador from Tel Aviv. However, it is all too little and tragically late.

The murderous madness of the Sharon government and its army and the warlike schizophrenia of the majority of Israeli people demand a strong and immediate international intervention, If this latter is delayed Palestine will cease to exist, Israel will experience the fate of the combatants of Massada, and the whole Middle East will become a field of radioactive ruins. Apocalyptic exaggeration? No, it is enough to remember what happens to those who don't stop at red lights.

[1] Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa mosque and environs.