

## Sharon's Shell Game in Rafah

by Starhawk

Just over a year ago, I sat in a home near the Egyptian border in Rafah, in the Gaza strip. A five-year-old, curly-haired charmer of a girl was on my lap. Her older sister and brothers did homework to the background music of the thudding of bullets into the walls. The children were so inured to gunfire from the Israeli sniper towers and tanks that they didn't even react until the gunfire grew so loud that the older ones dived for the floor, the babies for the fragile shelter of their mother's arms.

I was there with the International Solidarity Movement, which supports nonviolent resistance against the Occupation. I'd come to help the teams that were with our member Rachel Corrie, who was crushed by a soldier in a bulldozer as she attempted to stop a home demolition, and with Tom Hurndall when he was shot trying to rescue a group of children who were under fire from an Israeli sniper tower.

I think of them, of the families I met and the traumatized children who followed us in packs whenever we ventured out on the streets, as I read the horrifying reports of the last weeks in Rafah. The homes I stayed in have been razed to the ground, along with the crowded neighborhoods where the old men would visit each other at twilight to brew tea over a small fire and talk, where the women still baked bread in clay ovens. The olive groves, the orange trees have fallen to bulldozers. Children like the ones I held and sang to, and their parents, have been killed in the demonstrations protesting the destruction of their communities.

To make the lives of those more hopeful, and to safeguard the lives of Israeli children, it is vital that we understand the true thrust of Sharon's current policies. Sharon is the sleight-of-hand magician, saying 'Look here!' while the real action is somewhere else. Sharon says, "Look over here! We're pulling out of Gaza!" and Bush says, "OK, and in return, we'll stop looking at what you're doing in the West Bank." But Gaza and the West Bank are related, and unless we keep our eyes on both, we'll be victimized by the shell game.

Firing on a crowd of peaceful demonstrators with tank shells and helicopter gunships was such an outrage that it finally caught the attention of a jaded and cynical world. But the Israeli military has been responding to nonviolent demonstrations with extreme violence consistently throughout the past months, when an upsurge of civil resistance has arisen in the West Bank. This growing nonviolent movement is focused against the so-called 'security' wall that the military is building, which winds its way deep into Palestinian territory, confiscating farmland without compensation, scarring the green hills, uprooting ancient olive trees, and destroying the very communities who have

historically had the most peaceful relationships with their Israeli neighbors.

Those demonstrations have been supported by internationals from the International Solidarity Movement, the International Women's Peace Service, and other human rights groups. The villagers have also called for help from the Israeli peace community, and groups as diverse as Rabbis for Human Rights, Bat Shalom, and Anarchists Against the Wall have responded, along with many others. Standing together, Palestinians, Israelis and internationals have faced clubs, horses, and arrests, and been fired on with sound bombs, tear gas, rubber coated steel bullets, and real bullets. In the village of Biddu alone, five Palestinians have been shot to death and one has died of tear gas inhalation in peaceful, unarmed protests. Israelis, too, have been seriously injured, and many have privately confessed to me that they believe it is only a matter of time before an Israeli is killed.

The first intifada, in the late eighties, was primarily a movement of civil resistance, involving every sector of society in acts of noncompliance with the occupation, such as boycotts, work stoppages and tax revolts. Among Palestinians, the first intifada is seen as bringing Israel to the bargaining table, establishing the PLO as the negotiating voice of the Palestinian movement, and laying the groundwork for the Oslo peace accords. But the Oslo process is widely seen as one of betrayal. During the decade of Oslo, Israel continued to fund and support illegal settlements—really armed suburbs planted on hilltops--in the West Bank and Gaza, doubling the number of settlers.

They confiscated Palestinian land without compensation, built a network of roads which are off-limits to Palestinians and which divide and segment their communities, and established a huge military infrastructure to guard the settlers and staff the checkpoints that restrict Palestinian freedom of movement.. Disillusionment with Oslo led to disbelief in the Israeli government's good faith, and formed the ground for the armed struggle that characterizes the second intifada.

Only a tiny fraction of the Palestinian population actively participates in armed resistance. The vast majority of people want to defend their rights, but don't want to kill. A mass movement of civil resistance could provide an avenue for that struggle and kindle international sympathy and support. A movement in which Palestinians and Israelis struggle together, side by side, facing the same clubs and bullets as they have been in these past months, is tremendously threatening to the power base of the Israeli right wing. So this movement must be repressed, its leaders arrested, international peace activists denied entry, and demonstrations brutally repressed. The shooting of demonstrators in the West Bank sets the stage for the shelling of a demonstration in Gaza and the deaths of dozens of Palestinians.

The West Bank is the goal of Sharon's aborted Gaza pullout. Gaza has few resources, was not part of biblical Israel, and contains a large and unruly Palestinian population who cannot easily be integrated into Israel proper without threatening the demographics that maintain the thin fiction that Israel can be both Jewish and democratic, while denying full rights to the twenty percent of its own citizens who are Palestinian, and keeping those who live in the territories under martial law for decades. In the contest for this region, the West Bank is the prize. It contains some of the most fertile land, two major aquifers, and regions of still-unspoiled natural beauty.

Most importantly, it is the historic land of the Bible, where Abraham walked and is buried, where Joshua fought his battle of Jericho, where the prophets thundered and the festivals were celebrated. The West Bank was Judea and Samaria, the heart of the promised land.

Trading Gaza for Bush's tacit agreement to the annexation of the West Bank looked like a good deal to Sharon. However, he couldn't sell the deal to the right wing of his own party, who don't want to give up an inch or retreat from so much as an outhouse. So now the military has repaid assaults on soldiers by massive home demolitions and all-out war on civilians.

The 'security' wall is not a response to suicide bombings or some escalated condition of danger. It is part of a long-planned strategy, in place since the 1970s, to expand the state of Israel into the coveted West Bank lands. One piece of that strategy has been the building of the illegal settlements' which the wall encloses and, in effect, annexes along with surrounding farmland, destroying the livelihood of the neighboring Palestinian farmers. The linked maze of barriers isolates many Palestinian villages, enclosing them behind barbed wire, cutting them off from each other and the rest of the West Bank, and turning them into open-air prisons. The wall and settlements are also linked to the building of Israel's transnational highway, which will shift population within Israel proper to the east, closer to the settlement blocs, so that they can become fully integrated parts of Israel proper.

The wall confiscates land that sits atop the major aquifers of the region. Already the settlers, who comprise less than 10% of the population of the West Bank, use 80% of the water resources. The wall will take what's left.

The wall is the end of any possible Palestinian state. The two-state solution was a reluctant compromise for many Palestinians, but was adopted and supported by their leadership and the vast majority of those who live in the Occupied Territories. It relinquished almost 80% of the historic land of Palestine to Israel, in return for the promise of an autonomous state on the other 20%. To most Israelis, it seemed a

reasonable solution, and most Palestinians were willing to accept it, however reluctantly.

With the construction of the wall, that option is gone. The wall does not leave enough territory, water or resources to constitute a state. It creates isolated, open-air prisons out of the Palestinian population centers.

Whether you personally favor a two-state, one-state or no-state solution, unilaterally removing one of the major options for the region is no way to bring about either peace or security. And if Sharon's policies remove the option of a separate state for Palestinians, we must ask what end-game is he planning? Perpetual occupation, eternal effectual imprisonment for four million people? Transfer? Outright genocide? These options, elsewhere, are called 'ethnic cleansing,' and none of them are likely to bring about increased security or peace for Israel or the rest of the world.

A real policy of security would begin with a moratorium, on Israel's part, on the building of the wall, on policies of 'targeted assassinations', on attacks on civilians and brutal responses to nonviolent demonstrations. Such acts would be a small beginning of a change in course that would demonstrate good faith and a genuine desire for negotiations in which all people of the region could have a voice in determining their future.

It is up to those of us in the US, which funds the Occupation, and the international community to raise our voices now, to put pressure on Sharon to stop murdering civilians and children in the name of security, and begin pursuing a true path toward peace.

For a map of the wall, see: <http://www.gush-shalom.org/thewall/index.html>

For information about the International Solidarity Movement, see [www.palsolidarity.org](http://www.palsolidarity.org)

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