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THE WEST BANK ON THE VERGE OF CIVIL WAR

Roni Shaked

Dejection, confusion, and impotence characterize the leaders of the nationalist blocs in Judea and Samaria lately, as a result of their inability to act as a united body. Their frustration and the extent of their disarray are demonstrated by their failure to mark the sixteenth anniversary of the Six-Day War on June 5th. For the first time in years, there were no strikes or disorders. The routine of living went on just as on any other day.

"For the past several months there has been a diminution of the position of the PLO in Judea and Samaria. Its position has been damaged, and one hears more and more qualifications of the statement that the PLO is the sole representative of the residents of Judea and Samaria," says the head of the Civil Administration, Shlomo Ilia. Ilia sees the decline of the PLO's status as a direct result of the "Peace for the Galilee War."

The failure of the Hussein-Arafat talks crushed the hopes of the Palestinians in the West Bank for finding a solution to their proposals. The atmosphere of despair encouraged various local bodies, and vociferous, violent debates broke out among them in the struggle for local domination.

It can be said today with certainty that the national unity existing under PLO leadership since 1976 has been shattered. The split which has opened up lately in the Fatah organization, and the conflicts among the various bodies operating in Judea and Samaria are great disappointments for the West Bank's nationalist leadership. From the sidelines, other groups have begun to work their way on to the scene. There are attempts to return to the lap of Hussein, and calls are heard for cooperation with the Civil Administration by those anxious to establish a normal daily life.

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12 Moshe Hess St., 94185 Jerusalem. Tel: (02) 225874, 249441

IN THE WAKE OF UNITY

The eyes of the inhabitants of Judea and Samaria are turned these days towards the uprising in the Fatah organization. In the meantime, acts of violence proliferate among the various factions -- and not just between the observant and the non-religious, as might be assumed from the local press.

The signal for violent confrontation was given months ago, when an organization identified with El-Fatah--"The Youth Committee for Social Work"--violently attacked the leader of the Palestinian Communist Party, Bashir Bargouti.

"The Youth Committee for Social Work," now active in every village, suburb and refugee camp, is an organization established by El-Fatah over two years ago. It has local district commands and an overall headquarters. The organization is especially active in the organization of civil disturbances. Security sources in Judea and Samaria maintain that it is now evident that members of that organization were active in the 'poisoning' affair. The Organization's strongholds are located in the refugee camps. The group's leadership is composed of Fatah members who have already spent a few years of their lives in Israeli prisons.

On the other side, the Communist Party has fortified its ranks and intensified its activities in the front it has established, the "Voluntary Work Committee." The members of that organization are communists, adherents and supporters of rejection front bodies. That group's centers of strength are Bir Zeit and Bethlehem Universities. Its organ, *El Talia*, is published in East Jerusalem.

There is heavy competition between the "Youth Committee" and the "Work Committee." Members of the latter group accuse their rivals, the "Youth Committee," of having firebombed the residence of Dr. Nimr Awad, who is associated with the communist group. The stoning of an Egged bus recently, near the Dehaisne refugee camp, by members of the "Voluntary Work Committee" was intended to sabotage a festive assembly of the "Youth Committee." The stone-throwers knew beyond doubt that, following the stoning, the army would arrive at the scene and impose a curfew. And this was indeed how they succeeded in thwarting the event planned by the rival group.

The influence of the religious groups, and especially the "Moslem Brotherhood" is also increasing. They are trying to bolster their strength by distributing leaflets, by persuasive discussions, and by activities in various circles. Their most outstanding success in these activities was the dispersal of an assembly at Bir Zeit University, convened to commemorate the anniversary of the Lebanese War.

PRESSURE FROM LEBANON

King Hussein, too, is a party to the struggle. When he realized what was happening on the West Bank, he began to exert economic and social pressure on the population, in order to demonstrate "who the boss is." His recently

implemented policy is aimed at the man in the street and, in particular, at the younger generation. He prevents the West Bank population from visiting Jordan for a period exceeding thirty days; forbids graduates of West Bank colleges from studying at Jordanian universities; and restricts entry of young people from the West Bank into Jordan.

The economic pressure exerted by the King has begun to leave its mark. The flow of funds to members of workers' unions has been stopped, and grants and loans for industrial construction and development have been frozen -- measures which have created an atmosphere of isolation in certain circles. "The King's gone mad. How can he do a thing like that?" one of the West Bank notables - a supporter of the King's who prefers to remain anonymous - asked with some insolence. The King's pressure gave the "green light" to his supporters to go into action. About two weeks ago, a group of the King's supporters, headed by Nablus Chamber of Commerce President Zaf'ar Al Mazri and Dr. Abd Elkader Alkayat, tried to organize a coup against Bassam Shak'a. Although their attempt to hold an assembly -- where they intended to call for a peaceful solution (to the conflict) with Israel, for support for the King, and for cooperation with the Civil Administration -- failed, West Bank media devoted much space to the affair and, from there, the debate moved into the streets.

The village leagues may be gathering strength and status. Recently, in a demonstration of their feelings of security, they asked the Administration to remove the armed guards and the military protection given to them. "The Union of Village Leagues" has been established and is functioning. The leagues are active in the territories without fear, and their views are aired in a newspaper which they publish. The Hebron League Chairman, Jamil Alamala, wrote a declaration in which he expressed his full support of King Hussein and his leadership.

The Civil Administration -- which is also a factor in the interplay of forces -- is closely following events in the area. The Administration's means for collecting overt intelligence have improved since last year. Lately, the Administration launched a campaign to break the Municipalities' boycott against cooperative efforts. The campaign is proceeding satisfactorily, and its achievements can be observed in every day life. Simultaneously, the Administration is preparing additional plans, which are not yet ripe for discussion.

Elias Freij recently suggested a meeting with the mayors of towns in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The Minister of Defense would do well if he exploited the present situation in Judea and Samaria for selective meetings with mayors -- especially with those who maintain good relations with the Administration.

PALESTINIANS IN DISARRAY

These days, the Arab press tries not to report details on internal rifts and the atmosphere of gloom and dejection in the territories. The slogan, "Closing the Ranks in Democratic Ways," appears almost daily in the press. Because of the differences of opinion, the press does not support Arafat or his opponents.

In June, the roof organization of nationalist groups published a declaration calling on "our brethren outside the territories to unite and join hands, and to solve internal problems within the PLO democratically in the spirit of the resolutions of the 16th Palestinian National Council." Those who had phrased the declaration decided -- because of differences of opinion among themselves -- not to mention Arafat's name.

Gloomy and frustrated, Jamil Hamed, a well-known Bethlehem personality, says quietly: "Look to what a pass we have come, on what we Palestinians are wasting our strength. I am ashamed, but I must admit, we have come to the point of civil war."

Roni Shaked is a special correspondant on the West Bank for *Yediot Ahronot*. This article first appeared in that journal in June 1983.