

The PA's hollow protests

By Amira Hass

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Senior Palestinian Authority officials can justifiably say that settlement construction continues despite everyone's protests and condemnations - not only theirs. Europe is protesting, Peace Now is protesting, the United Nations is protesting and even Condoleezza Rice protests occasionally, not to mention Israel's literary elite.

The settlements continue to expand, along with the number of roads closed to Palestinians.

PA officials will say that the antithetical tactics to negotiations and protests - the Qassam rockets, guerrilla operations and suicide attacks - have not helped matters. In fact, they have only provided Israel with more excuses to confiscate land.

The evacuation of the settlements in the Gaza Strip, it should be said again, was a brilliant move by Israel to speed up the political separation between the West Bank and Gaza; it all the while masqueraded as "the beginning of the pullout."

The condemnations heard from the PA camp are for internal purposes only. It is a way of telling the Palestinian public that its representatives are in the same boat as the weak population that suffers under occupation, just as the armed struggle is intended to show the Palestinian public which organization really knows how to exact revenge. The PA's condemnations prove how ridiculous and impotent they truly are. They signal to both Israel and the Palestinians that it does not matter how many new settlement homes will be erected, a Palestinian partner will always take his place at the "peace process" show.

Negotiations and armed struggle are not the only means of fighting the occupation. The question of why the Palestinians have not adopted Mahatma Gandhi's nonviolent resistance should be addressed to PA leaders - not the millions of Palestinians who every day wage an unarmed struggle against the sophisticated and advanced methods of oppression.

The protests would sound completely different if the protesters were to organize a calculated public revolt against Israel's tactics of annexation.

There is no lack of opportunities.

There are hundreds of concrete barriers blocking exits to villages. The PA could send a bulldozer to remove one of them every day. Senior officials could come along: Mahmoud Abbas or someone from his bureau, heads of security organizations, members of the PLO central committee, senior Fatah representatives, ministers and directors general.

There are roads that are forbidden to Palestinian cars. PA officials and West Bank residents could form a long convoy of cars and drive on these roads. Many Israelis would be happy to join them.

Building and development are banned in Area C. The Palestinian planning office could order the appropriate Palestinian ministries to put up electricity lines, to prepare the infrastructure to connect villages to the water carrier, to dig cisterns to collect rainwater, to build schools, clinics and houses. Maybe even dig wells. All of the things that the Israeli occupation authorities forbid to do on 60 percent of the West Bank. Here, too, there will be no small number of Israelis opposed to the occupation who will join up.

The Civil Administration will come and destroy it all. Then build it again.

The senior officials accompanying the work will be arrested. Even better. Should only the residents of Bil'in be arrested for their unarmed struggle against the occupation?

It is possible to come up with hundreds of other measures of this kind, which could replace the official Palestinian governmental plan, and force the leadership away from their "make-believe state," and bring them back to battle for liberation. True, these measures alone cannot end the colonization, but they have the potential to end the status quo that is so convenient for Israel: expanding settlements, endless negotiations, protests and shootings. There is a potential here to change the alienated relations between the people and their representatives, to create a new type of Palestinian diplomacy.

But it is also true that such a vision has no chance. The present PA and PLO leadership has grown accustomed to living as a nomenclature. They are confusing the interests of their own people with their relatively comfortable ceremonial status; a status that is their reward for being willing to participate in a spectacle of respectability scripted by the Americans and Europeans for the benefit of Israel.