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EHUD BARAK, THE NATIONAL TRANQUILIZER

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The Summit that Failed to Inspire / Barak's Success in Seeking Consensus / Barak's Honeymoon with the Media and the Public / Two New Political Appointments

The Oslo summit meeting held in early November was great political theater. The memorial tribute to slain Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was both eloquent and moving. The pomp and ceremony attendant upon the formal dinner were impressive. The Oslo summit brought together Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Chairman Yasser Arafat under the aegis and blessing of U.S. President Bill Clinton. The three leaders met and exchanged promises and pledges, handshakes and embraces. For President Clinton it was an opportunity to achieve a foreign policy success that might take some of the sting out of his crisis-laden second term. For PA Chairman Yasser Arafat it was an opportunity to stand next to the President of the United States, indicating America's direct involvement in the peace process, and to solicit his support for a Palestinian state. And for Prime Minister Barak, it afforded the opportunity to signal to Israelis back home as well as to the international community that he was serious about his in-

attention to complete the work of his mentor and former commander, Yitzhak Rabin.

The Summit that Failed to Inspire

Summit meetings, like the one that took place in Oslo, have a certain mystique about them by providing the drama of breakthrough and resolution. It is true that all sides played down expectations of any major breakthrough at this summit. The two days of ceremonies marking the fourth anniversary of Rabin's assassination substantively yielded only homage to Rabin's memory and renewed promises to work for peace.

The Israeli public back home was neither inspired nor troubled by the scenes and pronouncements coming out of Oslo. For the most part, Israelis seem to be bored by the peace process. The new executive editor of the *Jerusalem Post*, David Makovsky, was quoted as saying, "There is no audible heartbeat to this peace process in any public sense." Hemi Shalev, a political analyst for the daily

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Ma'ariv, wrote, "It is as though everything is on a Mexican siesta. Nothing is happening. Nobody is moving. Nobody is making waves." For most Israelis there is a realization that the negotiations ahead will be tough and complicated, but at the same time, the basic outcome has already been assimilated by the Israeli mind. They have adjusted to the fact that most of Judea and Samaria, the center of what was the biblical Land of Israel, will soon become the new Palestinian state.

How little impression the Oslo summit made on Israelis can be seen from the newspaper editorials the morning after the summit. The *Jerusalem Post* editorial dealt with the recent successful test of the Arrow anti-ballistic missile, which has proven its operational ability. *Ha'aretz* editorialized about Israel's security services' overprotectiveness of the prime minister, as evidenced by their prohibiting Barak from appearing on the dais at a memorial rally for Yitzhak Rabin. They were willing only to allow him to speak from a bulletproof glass booth, which Barak rejected. The editorial criticized the level of security as overblown and injurious to Israel's democratic character by keeping the prime minister from being exposed to the public. *Ha-tzofeh's* editorial dealt with the inadequate government funding for health services. *Ma'ariv* commented on a recent survey that highlighted the problem of student violence in schools. All in all, it would seem that the Israeli public is verging on normality. Health, violence, weapons systems, and presidential security measures might seem to come right out of the pages of the *Washington Post*.

Barak's Success in Seeking Consensus

The fact is that since Barak has taken office, he has been remarkably successful at being able to diffuse and conciliate and gain consensus. This was first seen in the government coalition that he was able to cobble together. That the left-wing Meretz and the National Religious Party and Shas could join his government was a remarkable beginning. These political parties are sitting in the same government, although only a short time ago they would have had trouble even sitting in the same room together. Ehud Barak has studiously avoided the media flare of Netanyahu as well as the delegitimizing rhetoric of Rabin. Both had an alienating effect upon large segments of the population. Barak has made a determined effort to break out of

the pattern of his predecessors by finding reasonable compromises between polar positions.

Barak did not join the media frenzy, but neither did he back down, when Shas threatened to quit the government over new electric company turbines being transported on Shabbat. Unlike his mentor Rabin, who insulted and accused settler leaders, Barak chose to consult with them and thereby gain their cooperation in dismantling the first of the settlement outposts.

This calm, laid-back, compromising style of Ehud Barak has gained him the label of national tranquilizer. Editors, journalists, and anchors are dismayed and frustrated that Barak simply does not provide the stuff. No leaks, no screaming headlines, no sensations, no scandals. It is just not like it used to be. If nothing else, Netanyahu could always be depended upon to provide good copy. Yitzhak Rabin and even Shimon Peres could be depended upon to provide provocative statements.

Despite his similarities to Rabin, Barak is said to have learned key lessons from Rabin's mistakes. He supposedly realizes that he needs consensus to make the fateful decisions that will be subsequently subject to a national referendum. Barak has also learned the lesson of his predecessor Binyamin Netanyahu. Netanyahu's first three months in office were marked by intra-party conflict in appointing ministers. More serious was the bloodshed and international condemnation over the opening of the Western Wall tunnel exit. Meanwhile, Barak has signed the Sharm agreement, released Palestinian prisoners, including even some with blood on their hands, and, more recently, opened the safe passage from Gaza to the West Bank, which attracted nothing like the street demonstrations, protests, and headlines of days gone by.

Barak's Honeymoon with the Media and the Public

If Netanyahu as prime minister always seemed concerned about how things would appear in the headlines, Barak is an entirely different story. He does not seem to care about, let alone cater to, the press. No one hears much from his spokesman. Although the styles of the two men are very different, it also has to do with the attitude of the media to them. Barak is blessed by a supportive press, while from the very first day the press was hostile

to Netanyahu. This is not to say that Barak has been immune, but, rather, simply that he was given some breathing room.

What this means is that Barak has enjoyed a respite from Israel's withering and often irresponsible and accusatory press, and at the same time this has forced Israel's media to look elsewhere for news. In recent weeks one might have thought that Israel was just another normal Western society. The big news stories had to do with legalizing gambling casinos, corruption, and family violence.

Having passed the one hundred day mark in office and with less than one hundred days before the target date for the framework agreement for a permanent status arrangement between Israel and the Palestinians, Barak may find his honeymoon with the media and the public coming to an end. His achievements in his first one hundred days in office include avoiding direct confrontation with the right wing as well as his religious party partners, and restoring relations with the United States, the international community, and our neighbors. However, the domestic scene is causing him no end of trouble. An extended strike by the physically disabled gained considerable public support and led to resentment over the government's insensitivity in dealing with them. Unemployment remains high, and the health care system is in deep financial trouble. Domestic issues, whether it be the nation's economy or the highly volatile religious-secular tensions within society, are all taking a back seat to Barak's peace process priorities.

Rosh Hashana public opinion polls showed support for Barak, his government, and his policies, and also reported a high level of personal security and satisfaction. Close to 90 percent of the public responded that Israel is a good or a very good place to live. Some 74 percent are satisfied with the economic situation, and 62 percent think the nation's foreign policy is doing well.

Meanwhile, Barak's political appointments continue to mystify and create dissonance. In putting together his cabinet, he succeeded in alienating his colleagues who are key party leaders. Prof. Shlomo Ben-Ami, who wanted the foreign or finance ministries, ended up as internal security minister, which means he runs the national police force. Dr. Yossi Beilin, who wanted to be involved in the peace process, has ended up as the first non-lawyer to hold the post of minister of justice. And

if a university professor ended up as minister of internal security, then two of the ex-generals in Barak's government ended up as ministers of tourism and of culture. In addition, although Barak invited former Prime Minister Shimon Peres to join him in Oslo, he does not show any signs of intending to make any use of Peres's experience in the peace negotiations. Barak has had his way and enjoys an amazing degree of industrial quiet, but for how long nobody knows.

Two New Political Appointments

Barak's latest two political appointments also seem strange, if not mystifying. One reporter referred to these appointments as raising to new heights Barak's "surprise appointments." Dr. Oded Eran, Israel's Ambassador to Jordan, was nominated to head the negotiating team for the final status agreement with the Palestinians. That the appointment was a surprise can only be labeled an understatement.

All peace process negotiations have centered upon the prime minister and his office, with the Foreign Ministry being sidelined. As such, the appointment of a Foreign Ministry professional took everyone by surprise, and the choice of Eran was mystifying. Eran holds a doctorate in Middle East studies and has been a career diplomat for over thirty years. He is generally regarded as a highly talented, intelligent, and creative thinker whose brilliance and diplomatic skills are widely acknowledged, if not admired. At the same time, he is labeled as an opinionated and arrogant, self-serving individualist who has serious problems in working with staff and in handling interpersonal relations. Along with this he is proud and sensitive. Only four days after he was appointed Ambassador to Jordan, he tendered his resignation when he found out that Prime Minister Netanyahu had met secretly with King Hussein in Akaba without informing his ambassador in Amman. More serious are the stories told of his tenure as the number two diplomat at the embassy in Washington. He had very good connections with congressional leaders on Capitol Hill, but was unable to work with his ambassador, Moshe Arad, nor with the staff under him who resented his autocratic manner, so much so that Ambassador Arad supposedly sought and succeeded in having Eran recalled to Jerusalem. One can only wonder how Eran will

succeed as a negotiator where Palestinian sensibilities and honor are as much a part of the negotiating process as the substantive issues facing them.

Equally surprising, if not mystifying, was the appointment of David Ivri as Israel's next Ambassador to Washington. Ivri has an illustrious military past, as do many others in the coterie of advisors and officials that surround Barak. Ivri served as the Commander of the Air Force and subsequently as Director-General of the Ministry of Defense, and more recently was appointed to be National Security Advisor.

Ivri shares Barak's military background and orientation, but in no way can be regarded as an intimate buddy. In fact, it is reported that there were tensions between the two of them when Barak was Chief of Staff and Ivri was Director-General of the Defense Ministry. Nevertheless, Barak recognizes that in Ivri he has someone who can represent his strategic interests and military requirements to the administration in Washington. Ivri has excellent relations in the White House with the National Security Advisor and Council, with the State Department, and certainly with the Pentagon. He also enjoys a fine reputation with the U.S. Congress and has worked closely with many congressional leaders. What is problematic about this appointment are the two other elements that go

along with his responsibilities in Washington. The Ambassador to Washington is Israel's spokesperson to the media and the American public. He is also the ambassador to the American Jewish community. Without being overly critical, let it suffice to say that Ivri is no Bibi Netanyahu or Abba Eban when it comes to media charisma. It is also highly unlikely that Ivri has much knowledge or experience or even interest in the American Jewish community. These are two areas that require attention and cultivation. By nominating Ivri as ambassador, Barak recognizes Israel's vital interest in maintaining stability and continuity in relations with the United States and in ensuring American fiscal and military support for Israel's risks for peace.

The appointment of the highly talented and skilled David Ivri as ambassador evidences Barak's realization that the fate of the peace process will be determined in Washington no less than in Jerusalem and Gaza. But it may be ignoring the importance of American public opinion, the media, and the American Jewish community to that process.

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