



JERUSALEM LETTER

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Begin's Political Base - Post Sadat

There is little doubt in Israel that Prime Minister Begin is in complete control of the political power structure. Menahem Begin has always been the strong man in his party and has maintained his position unchallenged in the face of all comers. Today he enjoys widespread popular support as Prime Minister and continues to exert singular authority both as head of his party and as head of the government. No one for a moment doubts that he is the most powerful Prime Minister to govern in Israel since the days of Ben Gurion.

Nevertheless, it is a subject of speculation, both in the press and in the public here, as to the support which Begin might draw upon directly from his political base, namely the Likud party as well as within that special constituency which supported him in the elections, The Land of Israel Movement and Gush Emunim.

The Ha'Aretz newspaper recently published a two part series by Amnon Barzela on the positions taken by the members of the Likud party as regards the attitudes on territorial concessions and the possibility of a negotiated peace in the wake of the Sadat overture. The fact is that the political views of the members of the Likud party have not been of any real importance in the past simply because they were a political party of the opposition. Today, because of the dominant position of Mr. Begin as Prime Minister and as the sole architect of government policy, the individual views of members of Knesset from the Likud party still do not play any real role of importance. Nevertheless, it is possible and perhaps even likely that as events unfold in the coming days and matters will have to be decided by the government and the Knesset, the views of Mr. Begin's Likud party may yet have real importance. It is even possible that their views will have to be taken into account by Mr. Begin and his government in determining the actual conditions of a peace arrangement.

Mr. Barzelai in his articles analyzes the various parties which make up the Likud (which is, in fact, a federation of three parties): the Liberal party the Herut party and the La'am party. He contends that one of the myths which has no basis in reality is the myth that leaders of the Liberal party in the Likud are relatively moderate in their political views. If this was in fact the case in the past, since the rise of the Likud to power, it seems to have changed. The overwhelming majority of the fifteen Liberal members of the Knesset tend to oppose any territorial compromise in Judea and Samar.

Furthermore, key members of the Liberal party are among those who can be termed as most adamant in their opposition to any compromise. They are seen in fact to be most hawkish by their own compatriots in the La'am and Herut factions. In general it would seem that even after Sadat's visit to Israel there has been no real change in their personal views and positions.

In general, it is rather difficult to evaluate the political position and views of the Likud members of Knesset. The dramatic events of the past several weeks have occurred so rapidly and have tended to concentrate so consistently upon the Prime Minister that until now (after Begin's visit to Washington) there has been no reconsideration by the party of its positions. The Likud as a whole has met several times and heard situational reviews by Foreign Minister Moshe Dayan, as have the Liberal and La'am parties, separately. Nevertheless, except for pronouncements by the heads of the Knesset factions, there has been no serious discussion or re-evaluation of factional and party positions. There has been no serious attempt to examine whether there has been any change or revision in the platform of the Likud.

The consistent answer to the charge that they have failed as political parties to re-evaluate their positions in the light of the Sadat visit is simply that the negotiations should not in any way be interfered with by Israeli political parties making prior announcements of changes in policy or readiness to give away anything.

As such, the only way to determine what the positions of the various factions are currently, is that taken by Mr. Barzelai of the Ha'Aretz who simply interviewed personally each and every one of the members of Knesset who are members of the factions making up the Likud. Below are summaries of some of the conversations with these members of Knesset which can indicate what the party position may be, if and when the Prime Minister turns to his party with a peace proposal.

From among the fifteen Liberal members of Knesset, Barzelai interviewed twelve of them, the other three being out of the country. Of the twelve, only one could be considered to be a moderate, Abraham Katz. He was the only one who indicated a readiness for territorial compromise in Judea and Samaria. Of course, Mr. Katz emphasized strongly that he would be ready for such compromise only in exchange for a full peace.

Yosef Tamir who has generally been regarded as a moderate, nevertheless underscored his insistence that any agreement must allow for settlement in Judea and Samaria.

Avraham Sharir, the chairman of the Likud faction in the Knesset, from the Liberal party, opposes any territorial compromise in Judea and Samaria, but does support Dayan's idea of a functional arrangement.

Member of Knesset Moshe Nissim emphasized the principle in the Likud platform which says "Judea and Samaria will not be given over to a foreign power." He further supports Jewish settlement in specified areas of the territories.