



JERUSALEM LETTER

No. 6, March 9, 1978/Adar I 30, 5738

ISRAEL'S BIG THREE

With the arrival of Israel's big three in the United States it is worth considering their relative positions within the leadership network of Israeli politics. The recent lapses and errors, dissension and controversy, statements and counter-statements, have all combined to bring the present government's ability to govern into question. One of the successes attributed to this Likud government by a relieved public had been that considering what had gone on under the previous administration, the Prime Minister was finally in charge. It had been with great relief that we found that Begin offered decisive leadership and was no longer dependent upon "a kitchen cabinet" to support his positions. However, this reputation for decisive and strong leadership has been radically impaired in recent weeks. As a result the press has begun to detail the inner machinations within the government and to take the measure of the various leaders and their positions of power within the Israeli political scene.

There is no doubt that the locus of power still remains with Menahem Begin. The Prime Minister is, of course, the first among equals. Nevertheless, it is already possible to begin to delineate other foci of power which are developing around the personalities of those leaders near to Begin. Perhaps the game that is being played out within the press indicates not only Begin's current problems in governing but also the consciousness within the Israeli public as to who is number two and who might yet have to follow Begin.

Up until several weeks ago the top leadership of the Israeli government numbered four: Begin, Dayan, Weizman and Sharon. Sharon by his recent actions as well as statements has effectively removed himself from the top level of leadership within the government. Begin now finds his former favorite "Mon General" leading the revolt of the faithful over his alleged deviation from maximalist orthodoxy. Begin has discovered that his old ploy of giving his would-be successors enough rope to entangle themselves, has worked against him this time. Sharon has embarrassed the government too often of late, particularly by his declaration on settlement policy. Begin had put Sharon in charge of settlement policy in an attempt to play him off against Weizman. It was for this reason that the Agriculture Ministry was given authority for settlement in the territory which had previously been the Defense Ministry's responsibility. Sharon's rapid fall from power is evidenced by the fact that whereas Begin had thought to include him in the delegation to Ismailiya, there was not even the thought of including him in the present delegation to Washington. Nevertheless, although Sharon is portrayed in the foreign press as

a wild man, it should be noted that neither Begin nor Dayan underestimate Sharon's capabilities as a tactician and leader. Sharon clearly has a tremendous fund of military knowledge as well as intimate detailed information about the territories and their strategic value. However, it is doubtful whether Sharon will play any effective role in the political decisions which must be made in the coming weeks.

With Sharon's effective removal from the scene of power we are left with three leaders, all of whom will have been in Washington in the course of a single month's time.

Ezer Weizman, Minister of Defense has succeeded in carving out an interesting position of power for himself during the recent months. His quiet devotion to his role as Minister of Defense as well as the relationship which he seemed to have established with both Sadat and Gamasy, have dramatically raised him to the position of number two in the Likud government. If in the beginning of the Begin administration Finance Minister Ehrlich was ranked number two, there is no doubt that both Ehrlich's disappointing performance as well as Weizman's stellar performance have propelled the latter to the fore. Moreover, Weizman seems to enjoy considerable support beyond his own Herut party. Within the Liberal party, the DMC and even among elements of the Alignment there are voices and possibly votes to propel Weizman to the top position, if and when the time comes. Some of the newspapers indicate that Begin is not overly comfortable with his Defense Minister. Firstly, Weizman engineered the Likud electoral victory, which makes him a political threat to Begin's hegemony in the political arena. Moreover, Begin is not the type to forget Weizman's opposition to him back in 1974. And lastly, Begin could not be very ecstatic over the way President Sadat played up to "Ezra."

Even more interesting than Weizman's rise to the number two position has been Dayan's political come-back. Whereas Dayan had been in the political wilderness, a lone wolf saved by the grace of Begin, rumblings are beginning to be heard concerning Dayan's new political potential. Dayan as a lone wolf found sanctuary within the Begin government. Hitherto he has maintained his separate position and has refrained from taking part in any of the political stratagems adopted by the other potential heirs to power. Dayan, without a political party and without any widespread public support, has functioned strictly and solely as "Begin's man." As such he has not posed any political threat as far as Begin is concerned. Begin in turn has given Dayan his full backing. Despite the row over the Foreign Minister's unfortunate statement on Israel-Ethiopia relations, he nevertheless retains considerable influence and prestige as Foreign Minister.

What is interesting is that in recent days there has been considerable speculation within the press about the possible political resurrection of Dayan. Rumblings are heard from various quarters within the Likud, the Alignment, and even the DMC which could provide a political base for Dayan. Leaders of the Moshav movement are talking of leaving the Alignment if it refuses to break with Mapam. There is speculation that they might establish an independent party under Dayan's leadership. Members of Knesset Amos Hadar and Yehezkel Zakai, who represent the Moshav movement in the Alignment are on the verge of withdrawing from the party.

If they do break, it is likely that several others will join them who share hawkish views. Moreover, within the La'am faction of Likud there is support for Dayan as well. From the very beginning after Dayan's break with the Alignment there was speculation that he might join with M.K. Hillel Seidel who also is a one man faction in the Knesset. If the La'am faction splits then there is likelihood that several of its eight members might turn to Dayan together with Seidel and the Moshav movement members. Finally, there is speculation that even more members of the DMC might also be drawn into this orbit.

This then is the leadership team of the Israeli government which will deal with Carter and attempt to re-establish the government's credibility and strength of direction and purpose. There is no doubt that the three together make for a formidable team. Along with this each of the members of this team have their own political ambitions as well as positions.

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