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SCORECARD ON ISRAEL'S LEADERSHIP DURING THE GULF CRISIS

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The Gulf Crisis Strengthens Shamir

It is difficult to recall the circumstances which brought about the fall of the National Unity Government, the failure of the Labor party to form a narrow coalition government around the issue of peace, and the ultimate emergence of the Likud-led government just a few months ago. The country is still beset by the fundamental problems that have been tearing at the fabric of the society. But for the moment at least, the economic, unemployment, housing, and education woes of Israel have been largely overshadowed by the Persian Gulf crisis. Moreover, expected pressures for legislation arising from the Likud's ultra-Orthodox and right-wing coalition partners have not materialized, seemingly postponed first by the summer recess and then by the predominance of the crisis. The crisis in the Persian Gulf presents precisely the type of scenario for which Israel is prepared, and presents precisely the sort of

threat that unites Israelis in and out of politics. A snapshot of this government taken today shows a prime minister in remarkable control under circumstances that vindicate his political point of view and call for his brand of governance. As one commentator put it, this government was born under a lucky star.

Recent events have wreaked havoc with the seeming never-ending tensions and contests between opposing forces in Israel: Hawk vs. Dove, Likud vs. Alignment, Gush Emunim vs. Peace Now, Shamir vs. Peres, Shamir vs. Sharon, Peres vs. Rabin, Arens vs. Levy, Arab-Israeli Conflict vs. Palestinian-Israeli Conflict, Peace Process vs. Status Quo, Land of Israel vs. Territorial Compromise. By any and all measures, it is clear at this point that the right wing, in particular the Likud, is the big winner as a result of the Persian Gulf situation. The Iraqi aggression has strengthened the Israeli public's fears

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and insecurity about the intentions of the Palestinians, the PLO and the Arab world. There is little doubt that if elections were to be held in Israel in the near future, the right-wing parties would gain a substantial if not overwhelming victory.

The present government did not offer great promise when it was first presented to the people. The composition of the coalition government brought the Likud together with the radical right-wing nationalist parties and the ultra-Orthodox religious parties. Added to this was the virtual surrender of Yitzhak Shamir to his "constraints" ministerial colleagues -- Sharon, Levy and Modai. This in no way seemed to portend a stable, strong government. Given that prognosis, the government's cohesive and stable image after its first hundred days and the first thirty days of the Persian Gulf crisis comes as something of a surprise.

Appearing recently on Israel's major political television program, Moked, Prime Minister Shamir was the embodiment of strong, decisive, calm, quiet, resolved leadership. Shamir gives every evidence of a man whose hour has finally come. Political critics and satirists have long been critical of Shamir's inaction and determination to see nothing happen. Now suddenly his apparent policy of do little, say little, and keep a low profile is exactly the need of the hour and has earned him high praise from the Bush Administration.

Since the beginning of this crisis, Prime Minister Shamir has not called one special meeting of the Cabinet. Indeed, he even permitted himself to take a small vacation, even if not on the grandiose level of President Bush. Along with that, he did call all ministers who were abroad, recommending that they be home in Israel during the present crisis, and he has had regular consultations with his ministers about the situation. He also gave instructions to his Cabinet Secretary to make arrangements that ministers can call any time during the day or night to be briefed and updated on the current situation.

Perhaps most telling, he has been able to silence the regular infighting and leaks to the media for which Cabinet meetings have been famous.

Arens Surprises His Critics

The second most visible player in the government as a result of the Persian Gulf crisis is Minister of Defense Moshe Arens, who has performed admirably. When he first took office, most observers thought that he would have the hardest time of all having to follow the act of Yitzhak Rabin. Those who remember his less than admirable performance during his previous tenure in the Ministry of Defense were quite apprehensive. Then, he had seemed much intimidated by the General Staff of the IDF. As a person with no direct military experience of his own, he was at a disadvantage, especially in comparison to Rabin, a former Chief of Staff and a hero of the Six-Day War. Nevertheless, Arens has truly been a surprise. He is seen as a Minister of Defense who is in control of his ministry and has not hesitated to make the hard decisions which are his to make, even when they cause controversy or are contrary to the opinions of the General Staff. Indeed, he is being favorably compared to Rabin who at times was so indecisive that crucial decisions simply were not made. Rabin allowed the Lavi fighter plane affair to go on too long, as he more recently did with the authorizing of building new submarines. Arens' handling of the intifada has earned him the highest marks and is credited with leading to a drastic drop in deaths and injuries.

Arens has earned a new reputation as a hands-on minister, demanding explanations and not hesitating to enter into detailed operational discussions and technical matters which, as an engineer, he has the mind to follow. With the outbreak of the Persian Gulf crisis, Arens has assumed full responsibility for his ministry and is not being second-guessed, neither from the Prime Minister's office, nor from the Cabinet.

David Levy Goes to Washington

Another surprise has been Israel's new Foreign Minister, David Levy. He started off with a run of bad luck, suffering a heart attack on the day he took office. Then, after a postponement at the start of the Gulf crisis, his long-awaited official visit to Washington turned out to be a significant achievement for Levy personally and for the Likud-led government generally.

True, Levy's success in Washington did not include concrete achievements, such as acquiring new weapons systems or an agreement that the U.S. forgive Israel's \$4 billion debt. Even the long-awaited and sought after \$400 million loan guarantee to help settle Soviet olim was not concluded during his stay in Washington. Levy's achievement was the development of a personal relationship with Secretary of State James Baker. The lack of media coverage does not detract from the significance of this relationship.

Indeed, given that the peace process is necessarily on hold, personal relationships which can translate into personal diplomacy became the main objective of Levy's visit. Moreover, virtually all of the Israeli reports indicate that this was the objective of the Bush Administration as well. The personal element of the relationship between Israel and the United States has been sorely lacking in recent months, what with the virtual disdain by Baker and Bush for Levy's predecessors and colleagues -- Shamir, Arens, and even his deputy minister, Bibi Netanyahu. Apparently the Bush Administration went all out in order to give Levy a feeling that he was the man of the hour and the person with whom they looked forward to doing business. Reflecting this thinking, former American Ambassador to Israel Samuel Lewis noted in the Washington Post that "Levy is not so much an ideologue as a self-made, underrated, clever, occasionally demagogic ward politician, with a prickly ego, who has both the determination and reasonable chance to become Prime Minister after Shamir....He has occasionally dissented at

crucial moments from hard-line Likud orthodoxy."

The Gulf crisis has changed two basic elements of the Bush Administration's approach to Israel: one is that this Likud government has gained respectability; the second is that the PLO has lost its credibility. While the Bush Administration may seem more forthcoming to the Likud, this is not to say that it will abandon its peace initiative or cease to press Israel to reach accommodation with the Palestinians in the territories. Israel expects some rough times ahead as pressures will begin to build up for movement in the peace process. Substantive progress towards a resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is fast becoming and is realized to be a strategic need for the United States.

Will Levy's personal achievement in Washington be enough to allow him to become part of the true foreign policy apparatus? It is doubtful that Shamir is going to really allow his Foreign Minister to function as Foreign Minister. Shamir, together with his political advisor, Yossi Ben Aharon, have tried to maintain a firm and solitary grip on foreign policy insofar as U.S.-Israel relations are concerned. Indeed, although Shamir acknowledged Levy's stunning achievement in the United States, he also took it down a peg. In addressing a forum of Israeli industrialists and business leaders, Shamir said, "The main reason for Foreign Minister David Levy's outstanding success in the United States, besides his personal qualities, is the fact that for the first time there was no one preceding him on his visit. In the past there were those that would go to Washington before such a visit with their own ideas and suggestions to the administration, suggestions that created crisis and caused problems in the relations between Israel and the United States and indeed at the end caused the government to fall." This was clearly a reference to his former partners in the unity government, namely Peres et al., who brought different messages to Washington than those brought by

Shamir et al. As Shamir summed it up, "The differences of opinion in our government have ceased. The previous government called itself a national unity government but it is only this government which is truly united."

What of the "constraints" ministers who fought Shamir so publicly last spring over Israel's participation in talks with Palestinians in Cairo. Not only David Levy, but also his former partners have taken a back seat as a result of the Gulf crisis. Who would have believed that Ariel Sharon would go unheard of? Indeed, Sharon has been quietly going about his work as Minister of Housing. So, too, Yitzhak Modai, the Minister of Finance, has been devoting himself to budgets and possible devaluations rather than to interventions and interference on issues and policies unrelated to his office. It is increasingly clear that there is no longer a forum of four or a forum of three as existed in previous governments. Shamir is now the prime minister running his government, and it is Shamir together with Arens who are charting and navigating Israel's strategic posture in these critical days. David Levy, Ariel Sharon, and all the other ministers are simply being left out of the loop.

Equally surprising has been the virtual silence on the part of the right-wing nationalist and ultra-Orthodox ministers. They have been doing nothing which could disrupt or disturb this government's posture. Rarely has there been a government in recent years that has given such an aura of stability and sense of governance. How long this will last is anyone's guess. Probably true to form, we can expect a major disruption in the not-too-distant future.

Setback for the Left

If Shamir's right-wing partners, whether in his own party or in the coalition, are feeling left out, they need only look left to feel consolation. The "peace camp" and the Labor party in particular has sustained a serious blow because of the crisis. First, there seems to be across-the-board

Palestinian support for Saddam Hussein and his aggression -- across-the-board meaning Israeli Arabs, Palestinian Arabs, and the PLO, from the masses in the streets to the intellectuals. Whatever be the explanation -- Saladin restored, an inferiority complex in facing the West -- Israelis see only the hostile, unflagging hatred of an Arab world for Israel and its existence. Second, the theory that settlement of the Palestinian problem is separate from the issue of peace with neighboring Arab countries has been discredited by Saddam Hussein's repeated attempts to rally support for Iraq by dragging Israel into the crisis. Third, the weakness of Jordan in the face of Saddam Hussein has further entrenched at least the psychological need to keep Judea and Samaria. These phenomena have left the left wing scrambling to find new theories to support their unshakable conviction that, despite it all, peaceful co-existence is essential for Israel's well-being.

The initial expressions of anger and disillusionment, such as the mea culpas of dedicated peace activists MK Yossi Sarid and television personality Yaron London have already given way to attempts to restore a sense of balance and proportion to peace efforts. The rationale is already being presented for why Israel will more than likely have to face American and Western demands for a reinstated peace process, despite the crowing of the right wing. This theme was seen in a column written by one of the leaders of Peace Now in response to Yossi Sarid. "Yossi Sarid, together with many others in the Zionist peace camp, erred in their unflagging attempt to convince the Israeli public that there were 'good Palestinians.' This is the formula for today's disillusionment and disappointment. We don't need moderate Palestinians in order to strengthen the peace camp....Our purpose is not to be in love with them but rather to separate ourselves from them." This attempt has been termed by observers as the distinction between the "romantic peaceniks" and the "pragmatic peaceniks." However,

despite the attempts of the so-called "pragmatic peace camp" to speak in re-alpolitik, hard-fact terms, there is no doubt that the entire peace process has been put out to pasture for the time being.

Paralysis in the Labor Party

While the entire left of the Israeli political spectrum is down, the Labor party is in particularly dire straits. The Alignment had barely begun to acknowledge their status as Opposition when Iraq invaded Kuwait. Preoccupied by leadership fights within the party, Labor had not yet formulated a strategy or an agenda. The one pillar of the Alignment that had remained intact was the number one priority of the peace process. The current crisis has dealt a major blow to that position. Given that the Alignment's philosophical base has been undermined by the crisis, it is no wonder that Shamir has virtually ignored the Labor party leadership. In the past, such as in 1967 when Israel was threatened by imminent attack, the politicians have formed a unity government to meet the threat. Not this time. It seems that Arens did call in Yitzhak Rabin for a consultation on Israel's military situation, but there is clearly no intention to truly draw Labor into the decision-making process. The extent of Shamir's confidence as prime minister is seen in press reports

that he supposedly extended an invitation to both Peres and Rabin to join his government because of the present crisis as ministers without portfolio. Even more humiliating, although he had the courtesy himself to phone Yitzhak Rabin, he had Menachem Porush of the Agudat Israel party and the Minister of Finance, Yitzhak Modai, speak to Shimon Peres. Rabin and Peres turned down the offer, which was to be fully expected.

A columnist for Ha'aretz put it this way: "This government has had incredible good luck. Especially considering the fact that many experts expressed their opinion that this government when it was born had a perverted brain, weak vision, two left hands, and an uncontrollable mouth, one would have thought it highly likely that it would have gone off the track in a far lesser situation than that which we have encountered in recent weeks. However, this has not happened, and much to our surprise and amazement and from several points of view, this government rates high marks."

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