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The Golan Heights Legislation: A View from within Israel

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The recent Golan Heights legislation by the Knesset represents a dramatic example of the differential impact of Israeli government action on the international scene as opposed to its effect on Israeli domestic politics.

In the aftermath of this lightning legislation, the Israeli Defense Forces assumed a high state of readiness to counter any possible Syrian military action. The Foreign Ministry braced itself for the diplomatic onslaught on several fronts: The United Nations Security Council might succeed in passing a resolution of condemnation with a call for sanctions which the United States will not veto. The U.S. government might renege on the agreement for strategic cooperation with Israel and might even reimpose a freeze on military arms shipments. French President Mitterrand might cancel or postpone his state visit to Israel scheduled for February. The four E.E.C. nations might renege on their agreement to join the Sinai multi-national force. The new Israeli opening to Black African nations with the possibility of re-establishing diplomatic relations might come to a grinding halt.

Given these and more possible international risks and costs of the legislation which extended Israeli rule and law over the Golan Heights, the interested and concerned observer could only wonder what possessed the Israeli government to further isolate itself amidst the community of nations.

This view from afar obscures appreciation of the considerable political gains accruing to the Begin government by its daring and decisive action. Begin left the hospital amidst rumors that his physical condition was much more serious than reported. There was speculation that the Cabinet meeting held at the hospital the morning he was released was to announce his resignation for reasons of health. That same afternoon, an ebullient, smiling, and confident Prime Minister entered the Knesset chamber in a wheelchair to read the proposed bill on the Golan Heights, only to be compared afterwards to Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

Dramatically, as is his style, Begin re-established himself in the public eye as a forceful and dynamic Prime Minister providing leadership and direction to his party and to the nation. The sad and sorry record of the Likud and its coalition government, rent by inner squabbling and sieve-like leaks to the media, gained a hitherto lacking respect by its swift and concealed and concerted action. They took the public, the media, and the opposition by complete surprise in moving the legislation through the Knesset decisively and smoothly in a matter of hours.

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If the Prime Minister and the Government emerged united and strengthened, an equally impressive achievement was the shambles they made of the opposition Alignment Party. The disarray of the Alignment was painfully evident as they gathered in closed caucus to argue and shout at each other while the legislation passed its three readings in the Knesset chamber. Even their feeble attempt to demonstrate opposition by boycotting the proceedings was destroyed by thirteen members who subsequently voted against the legislation and eight who joined the Coalition in supporting the bill.

The process of disintegration discernible in Labor these past months is now perceived after their fiasco as possibly resulting in the disbanding of the Alignment. There is already speculation that the Alignment will break up into several separate party factions. Begin may well have achieved the dissolution of his parliamentary opposition as a serious political force.

In the wake of the Alignment's debacle in this affair, the leader of the opposition, Shimon Peres, called for a vote of non-confidence in the government for its "abuse of the democratic process." Indeed, there are serious misgivings and criticism of the Government for its steamroller tactics which constituted a deliberate abuse of accepted and traditional parliamentary behavior. Nevertheless, the content of the legislation seems to be of far greater moment than the tactics and strategy of its passage. On this point the Alignment behavior was so incompetent and divided that the media and public have responded to Peres's initiative by saying that any vote of non-confidence should be directed at the Alignment for failing to fulfill its role as parliamentary opposition.

Peres's calls for party disciplinary action against those M.K.'s who broke party ranks have rung equally hollow. The Alignment faction decided by a majority vote in closed caucus to boycott the debate and vote on this legislation as a protest against the government's abuse of the Knesset as the legislative body. As cited above, sizeable minorities within the Alignment broke ranks to vote for and against the Bill. In fact, seven of the twenty-one Alignment members who participated in the vote are members of the Alignment parliamentary faction central committee which would be the body to decide on any disciplinary action - indeed, half of its membership.

Finally, Shimon Peres, the leader of the Alignment, was severely criticized for being abroad and his leadership of the party was thereby jeopardized perhaps beyond repair. A Ha'aretz editorial included the following remark:

The role of M.K. Peres is not to tour the world over to conduct conversations with foreign statesmen as if he were the Prime Minister of Israel. He should be concentrating on his position as chairman of the Labor Party even if this task does not bring with it coverage by the international press and media.

If the Golan Heights legislation afforded direct political gains at the expense of the Alignment, it also served to stimulate and enervate an increasingly disenfranchised and grumbling public. To the Right - Begin signaled that despite the impending withdrawal from Sinai and the unpalatable evacuation of Yamit, he is faithful to the national and historic rights of the people of Israel to the Land of Israel. The Israeli media highlighted the dramatic gesture of Geula Cohen rising from the back benches to offer her congratulations with a handshake and an embrace to the seated Prime Minister. The ensuing cheers and clapping were stilled by the Speaker of the Knesset's gavel, who also added his comment, "Ha-geula shlema" - "Redemption is complete".

To the Center - Begin signaled that neither the peace treaty with Egypt nor the

memorandum of strategic cooperation with the United States would be maintained at the expense of Israel's basic security. There is a national consensus that the Golan Heights should not be returned to Syria. This is not so much a matter of historic or religious rights as it is a matter of Israel's memory of the Yom Kippur War, when the strategic depth provided by these heights saved Israel from the very real possibility of defeat. Most Israelis by now are convinced that Egypt, even after Sadat, means to continue the peace process. Some Israelis are able to contemplate a future accommodation with the Palestinians and perhaps even with a western-oriented Saudi Arabia. It is well-nigh impossible to find thoughtful Israelis who can conceive of Syria moderating its confrontationalist, rabidly anti-Zionist position. As such, there is general approval of the government's move to insure that the Golan Heights not be a possible subject of any future negotiation. Even Upper Galilee kibbutz members applauded the Prime Minister's initiative and castigated their own Labor representatives for not joining in the passage of the bill.

Passage of this bill was also considered an appropriate but moderate response to the Syrian missiles in Lebanon which America's diplomatic activities failed to remove. Such a response afforded Israel the opportunity to demonstrate, without the human and diplomatic costs of a military attack, that Syria would not get away with its action.

The view from afar sees the serious implications and complications of Israel's latest moves. Indeed, the government's hasty action has jeopardized recent diplomatic gains and may even bring down on Israel condemnation and sanctions. However, it would be a mistake to see the move as senseless, provocative and meaningless. Those who have criticized and denigrated the Golan Heights legislation have gone so far as to attribute Begin's solo initiative and virtuoso performance in this matter to a personal whim induced by his hospitalization and perhaps even by his medication. It is, I think, an error to attribute his actions to personal whim or to a grievous miscalculation. It was not that he awoke that morning and decided to antagonize, for no good reason, the American administration and the other few friends Israel has in the world community - or even to risk the possibility of war - all for a law which does not substantively change the existing legal situation. Begin's actions do make sense and do have meaning when seen close up.

At home, Begin has, by his dramatic move, considerably strengthened his government and party. If he were to call for new elections, one could expect the Likud to pick up a minimum of 3-5 seats at the expense of the badly battered Alignment. Not since the Camp David agreement has Begin and his Likud Party been able to represent itself so clearly and dramatically as the ruling government exerting power and direction.

As a final note, one should also be aware of the traditional Israeli response to outside threats and pressures. Historically, outside pressure - whether it be war or diplomatic censure - has evoked increased public support for the government in office. As such, the anticipated international repercussions - whether they presage a Syrian attack, a U.N. sanction, or an American freeze - would probably only serve to further add support and strength to Begin as Prime Minister and to his coalition government.

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