

Profile of a Political Agitator



by Mordechai Nisan

Ehud Barak, noteworthy Israeli army general with a highly decorated military career, acquired public notoriety last year for his role in masterminding, organizing, and financing, the sweeping protest campaign against judicial reform in Israel. Throughout 2023, prior to the slaughter of October 7, he and his like-minded political allies sowed chaos in the streets, intimidated citizens, mobilized strikes, incited army reservists, and brought Israel to the precipice of civil war. They engaged in a so-called non-violent struggle for democracy, speaking on behalf of entrenched elites in Israeli society, while charging that the elected government of Binyamin Netanyahu was illegitimate. Now, with the Gaza war still unfolding, the protesters are back in the streets.

Ehud Barak, prior to adopting a militant stance in the domestic political arena, had been at the pivot of Israel's

decision-making axis. On the most critical national issues touching on Israel's security and survival, we can illuminate the man's incapacity for sound judgment and responsible leadership.

Peace in our Time

Israel's craving for peace found in Barak a dedicated crusader. As the IDF Chief-of-Staff (1991-1995), two political challenges demanded his participation. He implemented the controversial Oslo Accord in its military dimensions regarding Israeli withdrawal in 1994 from Gaza and Jericho. Aside from the contentious Palestinian issue, Barak was also involved in negotiations with Syria and determined that Hafez al-Assad was ready for peace. Withdrawal from the Golan Heights, and expelling 17,000 Israeli citizens, were the essential conditions in trying to consummate Israeli-Arab peace between Israel and Syria.

To his dismay, the Oslo track was set on fire, and the Syrian track remained blocked; but Barak remained adamant to walk the road to peace.

In 1999, Ehud Barak defeated Netanyahu in the direct election for the premiership and set about again to negotiate withdrawal from the Golan and reach peace with Syria. In January the following year at Shepherdstown, West Virginia, PM Barak pursued a political settlement with Syria through the mediation of President Clinton. The president told Assad that Barak accepts Syria's presence proximate to the east bank of the Sea of Galilee, after an Israeli pullback from the Golan with demilitarization arrangements. Ultimately, Barak failed to reach an agreement with the obstreperous Assad, his heavy investment in time, energy, and reputation coming to naught.

Not to Barak's credit, Israel continues to control the high-ground 60 kilometers from Mount Bental on the Golan Heights to Damascus, rather than the Syrian army positioned to rain

artillery fire down on Tiberius.

Unsuccessful in his Syrian démarche, the indefatigable Barak relentlessly strode alternative paths. As both prime minister and defense minister, he decided on a unilateral withdrawal of the Israeli army in May 2000 from southern Lebanon after 18 years of incessant skirmishes and bloodshed. Barak's cruel abandonment of the South Lebanese Army (SLA) was a strategic blunder and a moral stain against loyal allies.

Hezbollah immediately filled the territorial vacuum – took over the south, moved its forces to the Israeli border, amassed weapons for further warfare, and exacerbated Israel's security situation. Barak's precipitous decision recklessly exposed Israel's population to the Iranian proxy terrorist movement. The bitter fruits of that withdrawal reverberate in the Galilee, with the evacuation of 80,000 Israeli residents as Hezbollah pounds Israel with daily attacks.

From the prospective of the present ongoing Israel – Hezbollah war, the miscalculation was of a piece with Barak's political arrogance to assume he would bring peace to the Galilee. Rather, he allowed Hezbollah to consolidate both its political stranglehold over Lebanon and its military deployment against Israel. The results have been nothing less than disastrous.

In July 2000, Barak conducted direct talks at Camp David, under the auspices of President Clinton, with Yasser Arafat to achieve a final settlement in the Israel – Palestinian impasse. The Israeli prime minister was in a generous spirit, offering over ninety per-cent of Judea and Samaria, much of east Jerusalem, shared management of the Temple Mount, and the return of thousands of Palestinian refugees. After Arafat rejected Barak's political largesse, the PLO leader launched the second intifada terrorist campaign murdering hundreds of Israeli citizens.

A Loose Cannon

His long and distinguished military service aside, there is no way to judge Barak other than as a political failure. He brought infamy and fatality upon Israel and the Israelis. His obsession with the flawed formula of "territories for peace" underscored the futility of Israeli withdrawal from any territories.

Reeling from failure, Barak's misjudgment has now led him to call for thousands of Israelis to lay siege to the Knesset in order to bring down the government. With his typical bombast Barak recently declared, "When the state will be closed down, Netanyahu will understand that his time is up." Promotion of turmoil has become the hallmark of Barak.

He once protected his country, but now endangers the country's national unity and political stability. Exuding swagger and ego, as demonstrated in his London Chatham House interview in March 2023, this otherwise talented personality puts his intelligence and experience, of which there is an abundance, in a dubious light.

Dr. Mordechai Nisan taught Middle East Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and, among other works, wrote *The Crack-Up of the Israeli Left*.