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**A TRAGIC HERO: THE DECLINE AND FALL OF EHUD BARAK**

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One cannot help but feel sorry for Israel's former Prime Minister, Ehud Barak. He has suffered a string of humiliating rejections, first from Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, then from the Israeli electorate, and finally from his own political party. The spectacle of Mr Barak's political downfall has been truly dazzling with its many twists and turns and moments of hope quickly turning to despair. His term in office was the shortest of any Israeli prime minister and his electoral defeat at the hands of the Likud's hawkish Ariel Sharon - a man conventional political wisdom in Israel long considered to be unelectable - was the most resounding in Israel's entire political history. It was not just the huge size of the margin (a twenty six percent gap) by which Mr Sharon defeated Mr Barak in the election for prime minister on 6 February 2001, but what lay behind it that really testifies to Mr Barak's political failure. Above all, the election result reflected an overwhelming rejection by Israelis virtually across the entire political spectrum of Mr Barak rather than an endorsement of Mr Sharon. For once, the Israeli public, so often fractious and divided, appeared to speak in one loud and clear voice, declaring: "Enough of Barak!" The one thing about which it seems Israel's political left and right are in consensus is their abhorrence towards Mr Barak. Together they have vilified him and cast him out into the political wilderness. The few political allies he has left now resemble the steadfast and dedicated followers of a sports team with no hope of victory, displaying a loyalty as admirable as it is irrational. And in the midst of all this adversity, Mr Barak himself continues inanely grinning and reaffirming to anyone who will listen that he made no mistakes and has no regrets.<sup>1</sup> Surely, he must have lost touch with reality.

**PUBLIC MOOD-SWINGS**

Mr Barak's political demise was even more rapid than his political ascent. A mere four years after leaving the army and entering civilian life, Mr Barak rode to power on a wave of popular enthusiasm towards him mixed with revulsion towards his predecessor as prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu. Mr Barak's earlier military career was studded with accomplishments - he had commanded an élite army unit and participated in some of the Israeli army's most daring exploits (such as the 1975 Entebbe raid), he was Israel's most decorated soldier and became its youngest ever Chief of Staff. His brief political career before becoming prime minister was no less successful, occupying the positions of Interior Minister in Yitzhak Rabin's Cabinet, Foreign Minister under Shimon Peres and then leader of the Labour Party after Mr Peres' defeat in 1996. It was this background together with his noted intellect and courage that gave so many in Israel and abroad great expectations when Mr Barak assumed the premiership in May 1999.<sup>2</sup> Many Israelis sincerely believed that Mr Barak could

deliver on his promise to bring them peace, security and economic prosperity. His avowed intention to steadfastly pursue the peace process with the Palestinians in order to arrive at a final settlement was welcomed by the Clinton Administration, the Palestinians and political leaders throughout the Middle East. Mr Barak's victory over Mr Netanyahu in the May 1999 general elections was thus greeted in Israel, in the surrounding region and around the world with a collective sigh of relief and a renewed sense of hope that things could only get better within Israel and between Israel and its neighbours. Mr Barak heralded the promise of the future, a future in which a prosperous and secure Israel lived at peace with its neighbours.

Less than a year and a half later as Israeli troops battled stone throwing Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, it seemed to many that Mr Barak's premiership had returned Israel to a darker past rather than ushering in a brighter future. The outbreak of the Al Aqsa Intifada on 29 September 2000 dashed the hope of many in Israel that peace with the Palestinians was within reach. All the concessions that Mr Barak had allegedly offered Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat appeared to be in vain. Increasing numbers of Israelis came to view these concessions less as the necessary, albeit painful, price of peace than as a series of capitulations by an incompetent negotiator to a ruthless and scheming adversary. The mood of optimism in Israel that accompanied Mr Barak's entrance into the prime minister's office quickly evaporated and was replaced by a profound sense of disillusionment and despair. Mr Barak was the chief casualty of this change of public mood in Israel. It was this that drove his erstwhile supporters to abandon him in droves and resulted in his massive election defeat. Nearly half of Mr Barak's voters in 1999 switched to Mr Sharon, cast a blank ballot, or did not bother to vote in the February election. It is reasonable to suppose, therefore, that if the Al Aqsa Intifada had not occurred, Mr Barak would still be Israel's prime minister today. Simply put, Mr Barak tied his political fortune to the peace process and thus its collapse spelled his own demise. During his term in office, the domestic political agenda was entirely subjugated to his foreign policy agenda. All the promises of domestic reforms that Mr Barak had made prior to his election as prime minister were quickly put aside as he pursued his central promise to make peace between Israel and its neighbours (specifically, the Palestinians, Syrians and Lebanese). Mr Barak has been faulted for his neglect of domestic social and economic issues, but his single-minded devotion to the peace process was quite reasonable, even admirable. Any political leader has to prioritise which issues to address, and in the case of Israel, finding a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, ending the war of attrition between Israel and the Hizbollah in southern Lebanon and removing the threat posed by Syria, were all of the highest priority. Had Mr Barak been successful in tackling these issues, he probably would have been forgiven for failing to deal with Israel's numerous domestic problems. Thus, it was the failure of his foreign policy that ultimately decided his political fate. As such, it is worthwhile reviewing his foreign policy in an effort to understand why it failed and whether Mr Barak is really to blame for this failure. At the same time, in examining the record of Mr Barak's foreign policy, his significant accomplishments in this sphere should also be recognised.

### **BARAK'S FOREIGN POLICY: THWARTED AMBITION**

Mr Barak set himself hugely ambitious foreign policy goals. He promised to do what no other Israeli prime minister before him had succeeded in doing, namely, to sign peace treaties with the Syrians, Lebanese and Palestinians.<sup>3</sup> His outline for a final peace settlement with the Palestinians involved an Israeli withdrawal from most of the West Bank and Gaza but not East Jerusalem, which he affirmed using the established official Israeli rhetoric would remain part of the united and eternal capital of Israel, Jerusalem. In addition, he vowed to end the highly unpopular low-intensity guerrilla war that Israeli forces were fighting alongside their South Lebanese Army (SLA) allies against the

Iranian-backed Hizbollah in southern Lebanon. To this end, he declared his willingness to unilaterally withdraw Israeli troops from southern Lebanon within one year of coming to power if no peace agreements with the Syrians or Lebanese could be reached.

Despite energetically pursuing these goals, Mr Barak succeeded in accomplishing only one - the withdrawal of Israel's troops from southern Lebanon. In itself, this was no small achievement. Mr Barak ended Israel's eighteen-year presence in Lebanon, which began in 1982 with its misguided invasion under the direction of then Defence Minister (and now Prime Minister) Ariel Sharon. Israel's military involvement in Lebanon was prompted by the emergence of what was then dubbed 'Fatahland' - a PLO mini-state in southern Lebanon- and was ostensibly aimed at removing the threat posed by the PLO to the communities residing on Israel's northern border.<sup>4</sup> Although Israel succeeded in expelling the PLO from Lebanon (at the cost of the lives of tens of thousands of innocent Lebanese and Palestinian civilians), in its place came a greater menace, Hizbollah (the Party of God). By means of a classic guerrilla war strategy, Hizbollah engaged Israel in a war of attrition, which increasingly appeared in the eyes of many Israelis to be unwinnable and pointless. Mr Barak's decision to unilaterally withdraw Israeli troops in May 2000 was in line with popular Israeli sentiment to 'bring the boys back home'. Although the hasty manner of the withdrawal - precipitated by the rapid disintegration of Israel's militia ally, the South Lebanese Army- and the televised scenes of SLA fighters and their relatives gripped by fear and panic seeking sanctuary in Israel made many Israelis anxious and uncomfortable, it was nonetheless widely hailed at the time as a success since what had become Israel's 'Vietnam' had finally been brought to a close and no Israeli soldier was killed during the withdrawal.

Mr Barak deserves to be praised for resolutely sticking to his commitment to withdraw from Lebanon and for fully co-operating with the official demarcation of the Israeli-Lebanese border by the United Nations. Unfortunately for Mr Barak, one of the main arguments in favour of the withdrawal, namely that ending the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon would deprive Hizbollah of its *raison d'être* and its rationale for attacking Israel was quickly invalidated as Hizbollah, the Lebanese government and the Syrians refused to accept the new UN border, arguing that Israel still occupied Lebanese territory (the area on the Syrian-Lebanese border known as Har Dov or Shaba Farms which the Israelis, supported by the UN, claim belongs to Syria). With the pretext of 'liberating' the remaining Lebanese territory under Israeli occupation, Hizbollah took advantage of Israel's preoccupation with the Intifada in the West Bank and Gaza to launch attacks against Israeli troops stationed in this disputed area. These attacks and the kidnapping of three Israeli soldiers and an Israeli businessman by Hizbollah have eroded the gains Mr Barak made by withdrawing from Lebanon. Hizbollah immediately took advantage of the power vacuum in southern Lebanon to increase its control there and without the buffer of Israel's 'security zone', Israeli civilians living close to the border are now directly in Hizbollah's line of fire. Arguably, the most damaging consequence for Israel of its withdrawal from Lebanon was the perception it generated across the Arab world of Israeli weakness. In the Arab press, Israel's withdrawal was depicted not as a strategic re-deployment as claimed by the Israelis but as a heroic victory for the Hizbollah and a humiliation for Israel. Hizbollah's strategy of constantly 'bleeding' the Israelis through booby-trap bombs and hit-and-run style raids appeared to pay off. It is hardly surprising then that Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza would seek to end their occupation by emulating the Hizbollah's success. Although Israel's involvement in the territories is of a completely different nature to its involvement in southern Lebanon, the uprising that occurred in the territories and the guerrilla tactics that have been employed by Palestinian militia groups in recent months indicate a linkage between the withdrawal

from Lebanon and the subsequent events in the territories. This could have been foreseen. Indeed, as early as the spring of 2000, Mr Barak received intelligence warnings of possible unrest in the territories. Instead, he chose to ignore these warnings and concentrate on a vain attempt to sign a peace treaty with the Syrians before turning his attention to the Palestinians.

Mr Barak's decision to prioritise the Syrian track of the peace process over the Palestinian one throughout his first year in office has been criticised by many as one of the major mistakes he made in his foreign policy. Such a criticism is easy to make in retrospect, but it must be remembered that at the time of the Israeli-Syrian negotiations, many believed (including the Clinton administration) that a deal with the ailing President Hafez al-Assad was possible.<sup>5</sup> The disagreements between the Syrians and Israelis pale before those between the Israelis and Palestinians and in theory at least are more easily resolvable. Moreover, the Israeli-Syrian conflict lacks the emotional and historical resonance of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict making it less of an explosive public issue in Israel. This, together with the fact that the Syrians pose a far greater military threat to Israel than do the Palestinians, suggests that it was at least reasonable for Mr Barak to pursue a peace treaty with Syria first (not to mention the fact that Mr Assad, then widely regarded as the only person able to make peace with Israel, was dying).<sup>6</sup> The failure to secure an Israeli-Syrian peace treaty was less the fault of Mr Barak than a result of conflicting national interests. Mr Assad demanded a Syrian presence on the Sea of Galilee (or Lake Kinneret, as the Israelis call it), which Mr Barak refused since that would jeopardise Israel's control of one of its major water sources.<sup>7</sup> It was primarily this dispute over water, an essential national resource and one that is scarce in both countries, which prevented a deal.

Perhaps the most damaging mistakes Mr Barak made in the area of foreign policy were in his dealings with the Palestinians. To begin with, not only did Mr Barak postpone the implementation of interim agreements concerning further Israeli withdrawals from the West Bank, but also he allowed the continuation of Israeli settlement building in the territories. Together this created the impression among Palestinians that the peace process had become a means by which Israel was prolonging the occupation and seizing more Palestinian land. It was this perception that Israel was not serious about peace and that the peace process was not bringing the Palestinians the benefits they were promised that fuelled growing frustration in the territories. This frustration eventually boiled over into rage and hatred against Israel vented on the streets of the West Bank and Gaza in the popular uprising that followed Mr Sharon's now notorious visit to the Haram al-Sharif (the Noble Sanctuary, or Temple Mount, as it is known to Jews) on 28 September 2000. Whether or not the Palestinian Authority (PA) under the direction of Yasser Arafat planned and orchestrated the Al-Aqsa Intifada (as the Israelis contend), the fact remains that it is overwhelmingly popular amongst Palestinians despite the terrible suffering they have endured as a result of it. Clearly, the majority of the Palestinian public feels cheated by the peace process. For this, both Israel and the PA are responsible.

The turning point in Israeli-Palestinian relations, however, came not with the Intifada but with the failure of the Camp David Summit in July 2000. In fact, this can be seen as the turning point of Mr Barak's premiership in general. Not only were Israeli-Palestinian relations severely strained as a result of the deadlock in negotiations, but also Mr Barak effectively lost parliamentary backing when rumours of the concessions he had made to the Palestinians at Camp David began to circulate. Mr Barak risked his life at Camp David, politically and indeed literally. His right-wing coalition partners deserted him, leaving him with the support of a mere 30 deputies in the Knesset and a minority government. Although he managed to survive two motions of no-confidence in the Knesset shortly after his return from Camp David, from then on it was just a matter of time until the right would topple the Barak government. To his credit, Mr Barak was not deterred by this and continued to

doggedly pursue his goal of reaching a final settlement with the Palestinians until the dying days of his government. The allegations made by his political opponents that he did so in order to be re-elected are entirely unwarranted. Mr Barak acted as a statesman, not as a politician. He pursued what he sincerely believed was in Israel's best interests, not his own. He was even aware that Israelis themselves might not appreciate his efforts on their behalf. On more than one occasion, Mr Barak likened Israel to a patient with a malignant disease in need of urgent surgery and cast himself as the surgeon who attempted to perform the operation. Although the patient might object, Mr Barak argued, the surgery was unavoidable.<sup>8</sup>

Rather than self-seeking behaviour, the charge of over-ambition might be levelled against Mr Barak. Mr Barak wanted nothing less than the final resolution of the hundred-year-old conflict between Jews and Palestinians over the area of historic Palestine. To achieve this, he was prepared to make considerable sacrifices. The concessions Mr Barak offered at Camp David were the most far-reaching concessions ever made by an Israeli prime minister to the Palestinians. These involved a division of sovereignty in Jerusalem, an Israeli withdrawal from 90-95 percent of the West Bank and full Israeli withdrawal from Gaza, an exchange of territory in order to allow Israel to annex the large settlement blocs along the Green Line containing 80 percent of the settlers, and a limited return of Palestinian refugees into Israel (under the criteria of family reunification). The most controversial of these concessions from an Israeli standpoint was Mr Barak's apparent willingness to 'divide Jerusalem'. In broaching this possibility, Mr Barak contravened a sacrosanct principle of Israeli politics - that Jerusalem would never be divided (despite the fact that in reality it is already strictly divided between Jews and Arabs). Even though the proposal fell on deaf ears as Mr Arafat refused to budge from his demand for full Palestinian sovereignty over East Jerusalem, including the area of the Haram al-Sharif / Temple Mount, mere talk of dividing Jerusalem was enough to inflame the passions of right-wing Israelis and cast Mr Barak as a dangerous traitor in their eyes. The issue of the status of the Haram al-Sharif / Temple Mount together with Mr Barak's refusal to officially accept Israel's sole responsibility for the creation of the Palestinian refugee problem in 1948 and disagreements over the number of Palestinian refugees to return to Israel prevented an Israeli-Palestinian deal.

The questions of the future of Jerusalem and the Palestinian refugees are undoubtedly two of the most intractable and emotionally charged issues in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Both before and after the Camp David Summit, there were many in Israel, including some of Mr Barak's colleagues, who argued that they should be deferred until a later date.<sup>9</sup> Rather than seeking an unattainable comprehensive final status agreement with the Palestinians, these people advocated a series of interim agreements or a framework agreement that would merely stipulate general principles. Once again, the benefit of hindsight appears to support this approach rather than the one pursued by Mr Barak. But, at the time, Mr Barak had good reason to push for a final settlement. For one thing, the ominous date of 13 September, when it was feared, the Palestinians would unilaterally declare statehood, loomed on the horizon. The Palestinian leadership, in line with their general public, was increasingly impatient with the slow pace of the peace process and were (and still are) in no mood to sign more interim agreements whose implementation is always delayed. The Palestinians were not the only ones seeking 'closure' on the peace process. The Israeli public too has grown tired of a process that in their eyes has involved relinquishing tangible assets (i.e. land) to the Palestinians in exchange for the intangible promise of future peace. A final settlement and a revocation of any future Palestinian claims against Israel held out to them the attractive prospect of finally putting the conflict behind them and getting on with other things of importance to them. Mr Barak himself was known to have been critical of the 'step-by-step' approach to peacemaking adopted by Mr Rabin and Mr Peres,

which involved a series of piecemeal Israeli withdrawals. Such an approach allowed internal opposition in Israel to mount, whilst never testing the Palestinians ultimate readiness to make the necessary sacrifices for a lasting peace with Israel. The shock therapy that Mr Barak applied to the peace process, by contrast, took the Israeli right by surprise and forced the Palestinian leadership to spell out the concessions Israel had to make in order for there to be peace. Although it turned out that the Palestinians' demands were almost identical to those they had long espoused in their official rhetoric (specifically, a full Israeli withdrawal from all the territory occupied in the 1967 war and the right of return for all Palestinian refugees), this does not mean that the exercise was in vain. On the contrary, it may well turn out to be Mr Barak's greatest achievement and a valuable legacy. By testing the limits of the Palestinian's flexibility, Mr Barak succeeded in establishing the price of peace. In so doing, he introduced a necessary dose of realism into the internal debate in Israel concerning the peace process. For too long, Israelis have debated amongst themselves the concessions that should be made for peace, with little or no reference to what the Palestinians have actually asked for. As long as it failed to address Palestinian expectations, this debate had an air of unreality about it. Now that the expectations of the Palestinians are clear, that is, when they say full withdrawal they mean full withdrawal, Israelis can realistically assess the price of peace. Like any good, it is helpful to know how much it costs before you decide to purchase it. No doubt, there are many for whom this price is too high but at least they can no longer plausibly claim that the price can be lowered. This helps account for Mr Barak's unpopularity amongst the right in Israel. Mr Barak exploded the myth that the Palestinians would settle for anything less than their own sovereign state in the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem. The right's refusal to allow any Palestinian control in East Jerusalem or to dismantle isolated Jewish settlements in the West Bank and Gaza will clearly not bring peace, to claim otherwise now would be entirely disingenuous.

Mr Barak's determination to conduct final status negotiations with the Palestinians, then, was driven by two objectives. At best, he hoped to arrive at a final settlement providing Israelis with the peace and security they desire so much. At worst, he would expose Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat as being intransigent and unwilling to make peace with Israel on terms acceptable to the majority of the Israeli public. What Mr Barak failed to anticipate was Mr Arafat's response to being portrayed in the international media as an obstacle to peace.<sup>10</sup> This response came in the form of the Al-Aqsa Intifada, a popular uprising against the Israeli occupation, and simultaneously a political strategy deployed by Mr Arafat to increase international pressure upon Israel to strengthen his bargaining position at the negotiating table. Mr Barak was clearly caught off-guard by the uprising in the territories and his initial heavy-handed reaction only served to inflame the situation further. Like the previous Intifada, Israeli authorities have not been able to find a suitable means of response, caught as they are between their desire for international respectability and their need to restore order and ensure the security of Israeli soldiers and civilians. Mr Barak has been blamed for his inconsistent handling of the Intifada, veering between an excessive use of force against Palestinian demonstrators and enticements and further offers of concessions to the PA to end the violence. The basic reason for Mr Barak's sudden alterations between the use of the 'carrot and the stick' lies in the impossible dilemma that he faced in responding to the Palestinian uprising. On the one hand, the Israeli public, acutely sensitive to the deterioration in their personal security, demanded an increasingly tough response to Palestinian acts of violence. On the other hand, the international community and the 'doves' within Mr Barak's own Cabinet, urged restraint and a continuation of dialogue with the PA to prevent the collapse of the peace process and possibly of the PA itself. Mr Barak clearly faced a 'no-win' situation.

Inevitably, the balance between force and restraint that Mr Barak settled on satisfied no one. The

killing of over three hundred Palestinians, including a large number of children, and the wounding of thousands more has been a public relations nightmare for Israel (not to mention a humanitarian tragedy for the Palestinians). With a sense of *déjà vu*, Israel's actions have been condemned in the international media, by the UN and by governments and human rights groups around the world. Many of the diplomatic advances in the Arab and Muslim world it had taken years to painstakingly accomplish were reversed almost overnight - most dramatically, by Egypt's withdrawal of its ambassador to Israel.<sup>11</sup> The terrible human losses and crippling economic damage the Palestinians have suffered in the months of the uprising have led the masses to become more hostile and belligerent in their attitudes towards Israel, and the Palestinian leadership, in turn, to be more intransigent in negotiations with Israel. Any peace agreement was impossible as long as the Palestinians were determined to ensure that their suffering would produce concrete diplomatic gains, and the Israelis were equally determined to ensure that Palestinian violence would not be rewarded.

Whilst Mr Barak was accused abroad of excessive use of force, domestically he was attacked for insufficient use of force. Seizing upon the complaints of some senior Israeli Defence Force (IDF) officers that their hands were being tied by the political establishment, the right mobilised public opinion against Mr Barak with the slogans "Let the IDF win" and "Barak is humiliating Israel". The right argued that Mr Barak's policies (such as the unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon, his major concessions to the Palestinians and his readiness to continue negotiations in the midst of violence) had caused Israel to be viewed as weak and vulnerable and were therefore responsible for inviting the attacks against it. This accusation was particularly damaging to Mr Barak's support among immigrants from the former Soviet Union, who, according to opinion polls, place great importance on having a strong leader and a strong country. It was not only the right, however, with whom Mr Barak faced difficulties. His own political camp also increasingly began to turn against him. For much of the left in Israel, the Al-Aqsa Intifada came as a rude awakening. Until then, they had confidently assumed that the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, despite all its ups and downs, was irreversible and that a final peace was attainable. This confidence was shattered as a result of the Intifada, leaving the left in a state of shock, confusion and disarray. Many left-wing Israelis were stunned by the extent of Palestinian animosity towards Israel, as displayed daily on the streets of Ramallah, Nablus, Hebron and Gaza. They experienced a cognitive dissonance between their belief that the peace process was virtuous and that the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza had effectively ended with the establishment of Palestinian self-rule, and the Palestinians' assertion that the peace process was simply Israeli occupation by other means. Just when it seemed that the end was in sight and that they could finally live in peace and prosperity, the conflict came crashing in and Israel's 'peaceniks' were compelled to question whether their dream could ever be realised. Given this, it is quite possible that, to use the language of psychoanalysis, the disappointment and disillusionment that left-wing Israelis expressed towards Mr Barak were really displaced emotions whose true object was the peace process itself. Of course, other left-wing Israelis abandoned Mr Barak not because they had lost faith in the peace process, but because they believed his policies had been detrimental to it. These people were strongly critical of the IDF's actions in the territories and of Mr Barak for authorising them. They also objected to what they described as Mr Barak's condescending attitude towards the Palestinians, and his failure to stop settlement building in the territories during his term in office.

It was the disintegration of the left, rather than the strengthening of the right, that produced Mr Sharon's huge winning margin over Mr Barak in the February 2001 election. Not only did much of the left not mobilise public opinion in support of Mr Barak prior to the election, but also many did not bother to vote at all or they cast a blank ballot on the election day itself. Although Mr Sharon

won 62.3 percent of the votes cast, he actually only received 36.7 percent of the eligible vote. Almost 40 percent of Israelis did not vote in the election, producing the lowest voter turnout in Israel's history (on average, voter turnout in previous Israeli elections was a high 85 percent). A large part of those who abstained in the February election were Israel's Arab citizens. The decision of the Israeli Arab political leadership, under pressure from its grassroots, to boycott the election cost Mr Barak dearly. Labour party candidates for prime minister depend upon the electoral support of Israeli Arabs. In 1992, Mr Rabin received their support and won the elections. In 1996, Mr Peres lost their support and thus the election.<sup>12</sup> In the 1999 election, Mr Barak won with a massive 96 percent of the Israeli Arab vote.

The immediate cause of Mr Barak's total loss of support from Israeli Arabs was the Israeli police's harsh reaction to the Israeli Arabs' riots in October, following the outbreak of the Al-Aqsa Intifada, in which 13 Israeli Arabs were shot dead. To add insult to injury, Mr Barak was then slow to initiate an official investigation into the incidents and never paid a visit to the grieving relatives or apologised for the police's brutal actions.<sup>13</sup> As a result, Israel's Arab community was seething with resentment and anger at the Israeli establishment, and particularly at the Zionist-Left who remained silent after the bloody events. In this sense, the Israeli Arab mass boycott of the February election was a protest against the actions and inactions of Barak's government towards them. But Mr Barak was not just being punished for his disregard of Israeli Arab issues once he was in office or for his insensitive response to the deaths of Israeli Arabs. He was paying the price for decades of government neglect towards Israeli Arabs, a neglect that has left them in the position of a disadvantaged and disgruntled minority. The Al-Aqsa Intifada was simply the catalyst for Israeli Arabs to express their outrage and frustration at their effective status of second-class citizens in a state constitutionally designed to meet the interests of its Jewish majority.<sup>14</sup> Their sense of being regarded as inferior, of being subservient, and of being discriminated against, together with their growing politicisation (some might call it 'radicalisation') led to their riots in October and to their election boycott in February. By demonstrating their political independence and not automatically voting for the left-wing candidate as they had done in the past, Israeli Arabs hoped to gain some new respect and power in Israel's tough political game. Their collective message was straightforward: 'If you want our support, from now on you'll have to earn it'.

### **A VICTIM OF FORCES BEYOND HIS CONTROL**

Mr Barak's political downfall was ultimately the result of his broken promises. He promised Israelis peace and security, instead they got another Intifada. He promised Israeli Arabs equality and respect, instead they had thirteen of their members shot to death by Israeli police. He promised secular Israelis that the burden of army service would be equally shared by Israelis of all religious backgrounds, instead the ultra-orthodox continue to be granted an exemption. He promised economic prosperity and better distribution of welfare services to those in need, instead economic growth has been paralysed by the outbreak of violence and poor Israelis continue to live in sub-standard housing and to send their children to under-funded schools. He promised to foster national unity and to be "everybody's prime minister", instead internal divisions are as bitter and rife as ever and he increasingly became nobody's prime minister. This record of broken promises was an electoral obstacle that Mr Barak could not overcome. On election day, Israelis were in an unforgiving mood and they duly punished Mr Barak.

A little leniency would have been fairer. Although Mr Barak failed to deliver on many of the promises he made before coming to power, this was not entirely his own fault. Mr Barak simply



made promises that he was in no position to realise. Despite occupying the highest executive office in the country, Mr Barak was hamstrung by numerous forces beyond his control. His ability to carry out both his domestic and foreign policy agenda depended upon the goodwill and interests of a host of other actors, such as the Palestinians, Syrians, Americans, the members of the Knesset, the leaders of rival political parties, and his own colleagues in the Labour Party. Mr Barak's chief mistake, then, was to overestimate his ability to influence these actors and ensure that they behaved in line with his expectations. Time and again, he found himself confounded by the behaviour of his adversaries, both those inside and outside Israel. He was unable to control a fractured and adversarial Knesset. He was unable to command his own unruly political party. He was unable to cajole his fickle coalition partners. He was unable to conciliate the Israeli right or consolidate the Israeli left. He was unable to cohere a divided society. And, finally, he was unable to coax Mr Assad into signing a peace agreement, just as he was unable to compel Mr Arafat to do the same. The responsibility for Mr Barak's failure lies with these actors and institutions as well as with Mr Barak himself. Mr Barak may have been guilty of hubris, but even if he had displayed greater humility it is unlikely that he would have been able to accomplish the hugely ambitious goals he set himself. He simply had to contend with too many opponents and too many conflicting interests.

What Mr Barak did accomplish, however, was significant. His sober-eyed appraisal of Israel's predicament led him to withdraw Israeli troops from southern Lebanon, and make generous peace offers to the Syrians and the Palestinians. In so doing, he saved many young Israelis from dying in an unwinnable war in Lebanon and he established the price of peace with the Syrians and Palestinians. Thanks to Mr Barak, the outlines of a future Israeli-Syrian and Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement are clearer than they have ever been before. If those agreements are ever signed, Mr Barak's efforts in pursuing them will no doubt be appreciated by future generations of Israelis. In their history books, Ehud Barak may well appear then as something of a tragic hero.

1 See, for instance, the interview with Barak that appeared in Ha'aretz, 2 February 2001.

2 Mr Barak gained a postgraduate degree in the United States from the prestigious Stanford University.

3 On 17 May 1983 former Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin signed a peace agreement with the Lebanese government of Maronite leader Amin Jemayel but it was abrogated by Mr Jemayel under Syrian pressure the following year.

4 The expulsion of the PLO from Lebanon was only one of Ariel Sharon's aims in launching the war in Lebanon. More grandiose was Mr Sharon's goal to bring about the expulsion of all the Palestinian refugees from Lebanon to Jordan so as to destabilise Jordan, bringing about the downfall of King Hussein and the establishment of a Palestinian state in Jordan.

5 Conventional wisdom at the time held that Hafez al-Assad wanted to ensure his son Bashar's smooth succession to power and not burden him with the problem of making peace with Israel. In addition, it was argued that only an arch-nationalist like Mr Assad would be strong enough domestically to sign a peace treaty with Israel.

6 In preferring to pursue the Syrian track to the Palestinian one, Mr Barak was following in the footsteps of his mentor, Yitzhak Rabin, who only supported the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations in Oslo after negotiations with Syria had reached a dead-end.

7 The Kinneret provides forty percent of Israel's freshwater needs. By having a presence on it, the Syrians would gain the rights of a riparian state according to international law.

8 See Arie Shavit, 'Between Two Worlds', Ha'aretz, 2 February 2001; and Uzi Benziman, 'At a Loose End', Ha'aretz, 9 February 2001.

9 Prominent Labour politicians such as Haim Ramon and Yossi Beilin made this argument.

10 President Clinton also presumably did not anticipate this as he publicly blamed Yasser Arafat for the failure of the Camp David talks.

11 Jordan, the only other Arab country with which Israel has signed a peace agreement, has also kept its ambassador to Israel at home.

12 Shortly before the 1996 election, then Prime Minister Peres launched the Grapes of Wrath operation against Lebanese targets, which led to the accidental killing of 100 Lebanese civilians in the village of Kana. In protest over what they saw as the slaughter of innocent Lebanese, many Israeli Arabs abstained in the election allowing Netanyahu to narrowly defeat Peres.

13 Ehud Barak did eventually apologise to the Israeli Arab community for the deaths, but the apology came only days before the election and was rejected by the Israeli Arabs as being merely a desperate attempt to regain their votes.

14 See Zvi Bar'el, 'It's not about the Temple Mount, say Israeli Arabs', Ha'aretz, 3 October 2000.

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