

September 26, 1984

COUNTERING PROPAGANDA

EACH OF THE MINISTERS “without portfolio” in the bloated newly formed government will probably be prepared to admit (provided his name is not published) that 15 or 16 ministries would be ample for Israel’s needs. Nor can anybody deny that, at a generous estimate, no more than two or three of the ministries require a “deputy minister” – that wraith-like figure who hovers uncertainly, desperately seeking a foothold, between the minister and the director-general.

Had the Labour and the Likud leaders been single-minded, and determined enough, they could have formed an economical, trim government, reflecting austerity and radiating promise of efficiency. The inflation and paunchiness of their creation are the direct consequence of nothing but considerations of patronage within their own parties and their pandering to the small parties – which did not have to be included in the broad coalition. The result is a substantial waste of money – and enough manpower for two governments.

This, however, is the reality to which the combined labours of the two major parties gave birth, and criticism will not undo it. Yet it is a reality that should be exploited: Suitable employment should be found for at least some of the unportfolioed, largely unemployed, members of the government.

IT SO HAPPENS that there are areas of historic neglect in the administration of Israel’s affairs. Some of them are, no doubt, not visible to the naked eye.

Some raise problems which, after being given the grace of lip-service, have habitually been swept under the carpet or dismissed as acts of God or accidents of Nature. Yet others are inhabited by cows too sacred to be mentioned.

A few years ago a member of the Likud government who had been designated minister without portfolio confessed that he found himself without occupation, and he had been casting around for a sphere of action where he could do a useful job. His research had led him to the discovery that the area most in need of immediate and comprehensive attention was that of the incessant propaganda campaign being waged throughout the world against Israel.

He had come to the conclusion that it was essential to set up a separate ministry which alone, with adequate machinery, could hope to cope with the gigantic challenge posed by the Arab and pro-Arab anti-Israel and anti-Semitic worldwide propaganda onslaught.

He knew that, after years of observation and study of the problem, and indeed with the help of advice from veteran toilers in the field in the United States, I had prepared a detailed plan for the structures and operation of such a ministry. At his request I gave him the plan’s essential elements. One of them predicated a high measure of cooperation, at predicated levels, with the Jewish organizations in the U.S. and elsewhere. Another element of the plan was its low cost despite its projected wide field of activity.

The minister did take the matter further but, like earlier efforts to deal with the problem, his initiative bore no fruit. Like them, it evidently foundered on the rock of opposition of the jealous mandarins of the Foreign Ministry.

SOON THEREAFTER came the war in Lebanon – accompanied by the horrendous campaign of lies and incitement waged against Israel by large sections of the Western media – most effectively on television. That campaign engendered a voluminous literature of refutation and protest against the media in the U.S.

The articles and pamphlets – and a video film demonstrating visually the distortion and mendacities in the coverage of the war by one of the television networks – undoubtedly did much to reassure those friends of Israel who had been shaken and confused during the war.

Most of this counteraction, however, was the fruit of independent initiative by concerned Americans, writers like Norman Podhoretz, Martin Peretz or Joshua Muravchik or (as in the case of the film) of a pro-Israel organization – Americans for a Safe Israel; and almost all of it naturally came only after the war was over.

Never were the inadequacies of Israel's organs of response more rudely exposed than during the war in Lebanon. Never were the friends of Israel, confronted daily by the vicious fabrications of journalists “on the spot,” rendered so helpless by the absence of ammunition for instant rebuttal.

Last year, at the annual “Dialogue” in Jerusalem, organized by the American Jewish Congress, a heartrending vision of that helplessness emerged from the description given by A.J.C. president, Howard Squadron, who was willy-nilly compelled to point to the glaring shortcomings of Israel's information services. His colleague, Carl Spielvogel (a leading public relations expert in the U.S.) propounded the inescapable conclusion:

“I would urge the creation of a cabinet post dedicated exclusively to the communication and interpretation of Israeli policy. The appropriate minister would have to be supported by a staff of Israeli professionals, trained in the contemporary skills of communication. It is no longer enough to be right. You must explain why you are right.

“Almost everyone accepts the need for war colleges. Would it not make sense to have a similar college in Israel dedicated to training public affairs specialists who would develop what-if strategies and scenarios for a wide range of contingencies?”

Mr. Spielvogel thus touched on the crux of the problem – the evident failure of successive Israeli governments to grasp the simple theme: that Israel is confronted in the West not just by hostile criticism but by a many-faceted propaganda-war machine with long-range objectives, operating at every level of society.

Israeli governments have evidently not come to grips also with the nature of the war. It is not designed to achieve a change in this or the other policy of the Israeli government. Its aim is to put an end to the Zionist entity, to delegitimize Israel – by the assertion, endlessly repeated, that the Jewish people has no right to Palestine, and the Jewish State has no right to exist at all, that the land is Arab territory usurped by the Zionists with the aid of the imperialists.

This propaganda is a powerful auxiliary to the aim of the physical elimination of Israel. It provides the infrastructure of justification in the mind of a brain-washed public for the launching of a future war to achieve that unchanging annihilatory purpose.

Moreover, successive Israeli governments have failed to face the fact that next to the hostility of the Arabs and their supporters, the most serious enemy we have is the wide-spread ignorance within the Jewish communities in the Diaspora.

Failing timely education both on the values of Judaism and on the grandeur, and the justice, of the Jewish national rebirth – as well as on the absolute nature of the Arab hoax on Palestine – many Jews, and especially young Jews at the universities, may be successfully brainwashed, by the barrage of propaganda with which they are assailed.

Nobody who has studied the nature and extent of the anti-Israeli campaign, and the many factors potentially working in Israel's favour, will suggest that that campaign cannot be defeated. Only – for that you need, first of all, a *hasbara* “war office” dedicated to that single purpose.

IN THE PAST, Labour, it is true, has demonstrated its understanding that a separate ministry is desirable for handling Israel's information needs abroad. Once upon a time indeed Shimon Peres was appointed minister of information. Later Aharon Yariv served briefly in the same capacity.

In each case, though, the Labour's grasp of the problem was not sufficiently strong, and the Foreign Ministry triumphantly blocked the development of the ministry. Before the 1981 election it was revealed that Labour again intended, if it won, to set up an information ministry and it was understood that Chaim Herzog was the likely candidate for heading it.

It was a grievous error not to include the establishment of such a ministry in the agreement for a national unity government. It is an error, however, that can still be corrected.

Why should Mr. Peres and Mr. Shamir not strike out boldly, exert their full authority and invite one of the unemployed or under-employed ministers to spend the next three or four months making a survey of the existing *hasbara* machinery in the Foreign Ministry, in other government offices, and abroad. He would, in addition, consult Jewish leaders in the Diaspora and activists engaged over the years in the *hasbara* for Zionism and for Israel – and produce a plan for a ministry which will be able moreover to mobilize tremendous resources within the Jewish people, and indeed outside it, to fight Israel's battle as it should be fought.

See Letter to the Editor on the following page

Readers' Letters – 10 October 1984

MINISTRY OF INFORMATION

To the Editor of The Jerusalem Post

Sir, – Shmuel Katz's article of September 26, "Countering propaganda," is a first-class summary of the situation, brief and to the point.

His emphasis, so far as the Diaspora is concerned, is on the U.S. But everything he says is absolutely apposite to the U.K. Those of us in Britain who tried to hard to counter anti-Israel propaganda during the Lebanese war were appalled at the total failure of the government of Israel to provide any effective public relations. One was forced to the conclusion that the then government felt that any efforts it made in that direction were not likely to make friends out of enemies, so it was not worth bothering.

But surely there is a further point to be made. A physical war to eliminate Israel is, we must believe, not likely to be launched in the foreseeable future, or ever to succeed. But a violent (and in the long run equally damaging) economic war is continually being waged and the effects of adverse publicity from the Lebanese war on Israel's trade and tourist industry (sadly on Jews themselves in the latter case) and on potential olim are only too plain to see.

Such a ministry as Shmuel Katz suggests could, for example, work closely with Jews in London fighting the Arab boycott and be of tremendous assistance. Let the pressure for this suggestion be maintained as strongly as possible.

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