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## SELF-ABASING STANCE

BEFORE THE KNESSET elections in 1981 it was clear from almost all the opinion polls that Labour would be returned comfortably to power. Only late in the night after the election did Labour's supporters have to admit that the polls had misled them. The Likud formed the government once more.

Indubitably, the citizens of Israel, many of them seduced by the profligate generosity of Finance Minister Aridor, had let the Alignment down badly. The Likud, albeit with a tenuous majority, staggered through three more years of office.

Labour expectations in 1984 were even more sanguine; but again the electorate failed them. This time, however, the nation, in collective wisdom, created a near-stalemate; and the rival parties were forced into a shotgun marriage. However much they kicked and struggled, however they twisted and turned, however sweet the wooing promises each whispered in the ears of the small satellite parties, neither was able to conjure up a viable majority.

The verdict of the electorate was unequivocal: the two major parties must work together to deal with an economic situation rapidly approaching disaster. Whatever the political and doctrinal disagreements between Likud and Alignment, there was no difference that could conceivably prevent their working out an agreed economic rescue policy.

This was famously not the case with foreign affairs. Here the built-in conflict on basic issues ruled out any agreement. The stark corollary of the stalemate established by the election was a political freeze which even emphasized the urgency of single-minded economic planning and action. Hence neither party was given a mandate to impose its will in the field of foreign policy. The symmetrical structure of the national unity government reflected this strange but existential situation, even to the extent of an exact sharing of power: two years of premiership to Labour, then two to the Likud.

SAD TO relate, the Labour Party leaders have evidently been trying to exploit the fact that their Mr. Peres was given the first turn at the premiership to try to impose on Israel their policy towards the Arabs. They have disseminated the notion that the Likud members of the government have no right to oppose foreign policy decisions made by Peres – who, from time to time, has opened channels of communication with Egypt parallel to those of the foreign ministry (controlled by the Likud's Shamir).

The instruments used for this ploy have been Alignment cabinet members – Energy Minister Shahal and unportfolioed Weizman. Weizman's help to President Sadat in his negotiations with Begin earned him a friendly constituency in Egypt. He has worked hard at maintaining that constituency. Now he is a leading exponent of the idea that Israel should hand over Taba to the Egyptians.

This desire is shared by the whole school of thought which, without any warrant of fact on past experience (which all speaks against them) continue to mouth the belief that peace with the Arabs is attainable if only Israel will continue to give up territory. The current territorial candidate for early delivery is Taba; and they have pronounced the

principle that Labour's attitude must be endorsed by the Likud on pain of being branded as "obstructors of the peace process."

Quite apart from political logic and equity – they have evidently lost all sense of national dignity. Egypt signed a peace treaty in 1979, whereby Israel gave up all of Sinai. Egypt has failed to fulfill most of its terms and has violated its most important clauses. The meanest intelligence and sheer self-respect surely require that Israel reply in this sense:

"If you declare Taba as a legitimate subject of contention under the terms of our treaty we cannot object. We shall, however, not negotiate on that or any other subject until we see you, at least now after six years, fulfilling your obligations under the treaty. Remove the restrictions on tourists, honour your signature on the dozens of agreements on trade, return your ambassador to Israel and put a stop to the stream of propaganda against Israel and the Jewish people. When that backlog of primary obligations has been dealt with, we shall be happy to talk Taba."

Normal? Reasonable? Dignified? Polite? Instead, the government – at least its Labour component – in a demonstration of incredible self-abasement – is engaged in absolving the Egyptians and pretending that the "peace process" is being held up, because the Likud will not agree to Israel's giving up the few square metres of Taba.

Much more important than Taba itself is the implication of the very act of agreement to negotiate with Egypt while Egypt continues to cock a snook at the peace treaty and at Israel. It is a further demonstration of Israeli governments' accepting the principle that treaties and agreements with Israel may be flouted with impunity by the other contracting party.

THE LABOUR leaders are not alone in this shame. Mr. Shamir and his colleagues did indeed, early in the dispute, insist that Egypt must first fulfill her solemn obligations under the peace treaty. That reasonable and dignified stance has manifestly been abandoned. True to the tradition of step-by-step retreat introduced by Mr. Begin, they have acquiesced in bowing to the *diktat* of President Mubarak that Taba, Taba and only Taba shall be dealt with.

Now they are reduced to making a last-ditch stand – on the *method* by which the exclusive subject of Taba's future is to be decided. They stand by the principle – correct in itself – that "conciliation" must be tried first; but they are surely aware that once Mubarak insists on arbitration, the introductory "conciliation" process will be a humiliating farce.

Defence Minister Rabin, in a radio interview last week, asked why we should be "afraid" of arbitration if, as we believe, Israel's case on Taba is strong.

There can be no doubt that Taba should remain part of Israel – if justice is to be done. Taba lies inside the former Turkish province of Palestine as agreed upon solemnly in 1906 between Britain and the Ottoman Empire. There are maps to prove it.

Yet a later map, relating to 1914, excludes Taba from Palestine. The explanation is simple. In 1914, anticipating war with Turkey, a group of British political agents, pretending to be archeologists, moved the boundary markers just a little so as to bring Taba into Egypt (then a British protectorate).

It is on this later map that Egypt depends for its case; and a serious arbitrator should have no difficulty in rejecting such a map based on a piece of international theft, a plain straightforward fake.

Where, however, will Mr. Rabin find the arbitrator who will be prepared to rouse the ire of the Egyptians and to awaken the chorus of curses (and, maybe, threats) of the whole "Arab world," not to mention the displeasure of the U.S. State Department, of the Quai D'Orsay, of the Kremlin and, last but not least, the British themselves?

To take all these risks when, after all, there is a printed map in existence, of plausible venerability, which does support the Egyptian claim. There is after all no stamp on it to say it is "false"; and the arbitrator will be able to circle Taba in red and hang the map on his wall without even a twinge of conscience for the rest of his life.

WHY DID the British want Taba? It was not for a practical joke, or as an exercise in lifting boundary stones. They saw that Taba, from a military point of view, was important enough to be stolen; and today Egypt holding Taba could "look in at the windows of Eilat."

However, to a defence minister (Rabin) who once (in March 1975) declared the Sinai passes to be absolutely vital to Israel's security and then (in August) gave them up at the demand of U.S. Secretary of State Kissinger; to a political party (Labour) which, for Israel's "minimal security" poured billions into building a powerful military and civilian presence in the strip of Sinai between Rafiah and Sharm-e-Sheikh, and then meekly acquiesced in Begin's surrender of the whole of Sinai – how insignificant must seem the security value of little Taba, even if it belongs to Israel.

There is moreover a prospect of recompense. If Israel gives in on Taba, it is possible (though not, of course, certain) that Mubarak, in person, will consent to sit down at the same table as Peres; and there, face to face, will be able to tell him in all frankness, what next Israel must give up in order to promote the "peace process."