

July 24, 1992

## THE UNSPOKEN WARNING TO RABIN

SO that there should be no misunderstanding, let it be said at once: The Arabs have this week been taking a step forward in what all of them call "the right direction" - that is, toward the hoped-for elimination of the State of Israel. The term "peace process" is understood by the Arabs, all of them, as simply a process of Israeli retreat to the Armistice Lines of 1949 - including Jerusalem. Restriction of the Jewish presence in those areas of Eretz Yisrael is seen by them as creating momentum toward a total freezing of that presence.

This step is not necessarily irreversible. It will not necessarily be of permanent effect. Even its immediate impact may be blunted.

But in this partial "freeze" there is plenty of room for Arab hope. Secondly, any Israeli concession to the Arabs less than complete surrender will be followed by demands for more concessions. No peace treaty will result from "partial" Israeli concessions.

The Arabs may be prepared to sign a formal peace treaty based on an Israel sans Judea, sans Jerusalem, sans Samaria and Gaza, sans the Jordan Valley - and provided it agrees to "the right of return." To that end, the Arabs - all of them - will continue to strive. After his election, Mr Rabin proclaimed that he was initiating a new set of priorities for Israel. It turned out that he was mistaken.

He was upstaged by Mr Baker. (Indeed, in strange coincidence, he was upstaged also by President Mubarak.) Disregarding the civilities of diplomatic discourse, Baker simply invited himself; and there he was on our doorstep, barely giving the new government time to pull on its trousers and brush its teeth. Elementary dignity, a modicum of commonsense and an ounce of political finesse would dictate that our government propose a late date "more convenient" for itself for a meeting.

At such a meeting, moreover, on its home ground, our government should set the agenda and not just adapt itself to the exigencies of the foreign statesmen. Mr Baker's haste is understandable. His master, President Bush, needs a boost from any conceivable quarter, in his struggle - suddenly become almost desperate - to stay in office for four more years.

It is not so long ago that he was at the height of his popularity. It was then, incidentally, that his constraints were loosened and he felt free to hurl insults at the Jews of America, and to let loose patronizing fibs about Israel. At that time people in America began saying that he was too absorbed in foreign affairs and not paying enough attention to an ailing economy but that on the whole he was doing a good job.

Then gradually, with the help of the realities developing in Iraq, it dawned on the public that beyond the salvaging of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, he had inflicted on the US a severe moral and political defeat, with likely long-term implications for American - and Western - global security. Saddam Hussein's power, and his hold on the central pillar of his power - the army - seemed substantially unshakable. Now a great backlash has grown in the US against Mr Bush, sharpened by a mass of reports about aid and comfort and encouragement given Saddam Hussein up to the very eve of the invasion of Kuwait.

HAS Israel nothing to say about the post-war realities in Iraq? Is Mr Bush's new

universally recognized deliberate failure to destroy Iraqi power not Israel's business? Does not the question answer itself? In fact, it is highly relevant to Israel, to its security, and to its relations with the US. President Bush's decision not to complete the victory over Iraq was taken in compliance with the wishes of then Soviet president Gorbachev, and on the advice of Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia does not fear a new Iraqi invasion, and anyhow knows that in any future war it would be protected by the US.

It does not however want to see a serious weakening of any Arab-state member of the permanent coalition against Israel. Iraq, therefore, with or without Saddam, had to be preserved for that paramount Arab cause; and President Bush complied. It is not entirely fanciful to assume that part of the US quid pro quo with Saudi Arabia is reflected in the purchase by Riyadh, in the 18 months since the Gulf war, of a stunning \$12 billion worth of US arms.

It is also not fanciful to assume that the US administration knows well that the purpose of the gigantic arsenal being built over the years in Saudi Arabia is to make arms available to any "needy" Arab state for the day when the great all-Arab offensive against Israel opens. Hence the repeated protests by successive Israeli governments, and resistance by large numbers of senators and representatives in Washington. Are not these the kind of issues that should have been discussed at a first meeting of the American secretary of state and the Israeli prime minister? No less significant in the relations between Jerusalem and Washington, should not the new prime minister have taken this first opportunity of asking Mr Baker why, of all the 60, repeat 60, governments to whom the US has been giving loan guarantees over the years, Israel is the only one (repeat, the only one) on whom the US administration insists on imposing political conditions - and what conditions! Mr Avraham Shohat, the new finance minister, has come up with the fatuous remark that, as freezing settlements has been Labor policy anyhow, it is not a response to the loan guarantee withholding threat.

He is evidently unaware that in the US, in the rest of the world and among the Arabs (they who watch most carefully for any sign of Israeli weakness and dependence), see the equation starkly between loan guarantees and settlement freezing. They all have eyes and ears - and brains - and have seen that equation unequivocally expressed in all the Israeli media, in the rhetoric of all the Israeli politicians, and down to the very reports on the conversations between Rabin and Baker. The previous government sinned woefully in not firmly withdrawing its request for loan guarantees and not seeking other sources.

Mr Rabin, however, promised a new agenda. His government has manifestly not even thought of seeking other feasible ways and means of funding the \$2 billion annually - and to avoid the humiliation, the far-reaching effect on Israel's image, and the no less sinister political implications of accepting the American diktat. In their exuberance over the smiles and cordialities of the week's meetings, Mr Rabin and his supporters have evidently failed to notice the warning implicit in the reactions of both President Mubarak and Secretary of State Baker to the far-reaching tilt in Israeli policy.

"More," said Baker. "Right direction," said Mubarak, "but not substantial. More is required." They only left unspoken, "Or else."