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Vision of freeze and withdrawal

A VALIANT Minister of Finance, Yigal Cohen-Orgad, turning his back on the disastrous course pursued by this immediate predecessor Yoram Aridor, comes down on his colleagues in government and on the public with a series of draconic – but essential – measures in an effort to avert economic calamity. Like Yigael Hurvitz – the finance minister in 1980 who, equally courageous, tried to stem the downhill progress of a society living beyond its means – Cohen-Orgad encounters resistance on all sides.

The Histadrut leaders, while they may not have initiated the flood of civil service strikes now plaguing the public, have manifestly been encouraging them; and cabinet ministers, for their part, go on debating for weeks on end the urgent proposals for drastic reduction in government expenditures.

The ministers, who agree collectively that reduction is vital, raise their individual eyebrows in surprise, and their voices in successive solo protests, at the notion that they personally have to accept cuts in their individual ministerial fiefdoms. The Labour Alignment leaders forget it is they who originally set the nation on its course of economic carelessness and that the failure to stem it was a prime reason for their electoral defeat in 1977. There is no obvious sign that they have learned the lesson of their own and the Likud's guilt; but they now preach, in mystical incantation, the vision of their own return to power as the definitive cure for Israel's ills.

For immediate succour they insist that the government should cease investment in areas densely populated with Arabs in Judea and Samaria which, Gad Ya'acobi reveals, they regard as "a total waste"; and that the government should eliminate "expenditure connected with IDF involvement in the Lebanese quagmire" (*Jerusalem Post*, January 17).

A CRUCIAL contribution to the creation in 1976 of that "quagmire" was made by the Alignment leaders. They gave their consent, at American persuasion, to the Syrian forces' entry into Lebanon.

They surely knew that Syria's alleged purpose – to serve as a "peace-maker" – was a thin camouflage of their historic aim to dominate Lebanon (itself a step towards the "Greater Syria" dream which includes Palestine on both sides of the Jordan). That was when the Rabin government drew the famous "red line" marking the "acceptable" limits of Syrian penetration.

Now, even the U.S. policy-makers admit grudgingly that Syria is the dominant actor in the Lebanese tragedy. It was Syria that made possible and encouraged the PLO's reign of terror and which, with Soviet cooperation, fostered the PLO's tremendous growth as an armed force threatening the population of Galilee – until its power was broken in 1982. The Peace for Galilee war in 1982 would surely have been avoided if the Israeli Air Force's 1981 offensive on PLO bases and headquarters had been maintained to the end. But the Likud government, pressed by Washington – pressed in its turn by the Saudis to whom Arafat had appealed when he felt his PLO structure crumbling in ruins – agreed to a cease-fire.

That irresponsible decision made later war inevitable.

Today withdrawal from Lebanon can be contemplated – because the PLO factor has been eliminated. It would have to be based on an agreement with the local Lebanese forces who would undertake to prevent penetration by Syrian or other elements, including residual PLO terrorists.

This evidently continues to be the government's aim; and the suggestion that it should order a "unilateral withdrawal" – thus exposing the Galilee civilian population to a renewed reign of terror in the near future – is not only ludicrous, it is reprehensible.

THE PROPOSAL to eliminate the expense of establishing settlements in "densely populated Arab areas" has been enveloped in sanctimonious double-talk. As it happens, the settlements in Judea and Samaria are located overwhelmingly in areas that are not "densely populated" by Arabs. What Mr. Ya'acobi and the other Labour leaders really mean is that settlements by the Likud government should be frozen. Settlements established by the Alignment should be exempt. Ya'acobi's party colleague Yossi Sarid in a radio talk this week derisively exposed the hypocrisy of the official party formula.

They all know that even if it were reasonable national policy to freeze the Jewish presence beyond the 1949 Armistice lines, the saving in money would be minimal. At its height, settlement activity in Judea, Samaria and Gaza cost the nation slightly more than 1 per cent of the national budget (some \$250 million); and, after all, houses built for Jews to live in Ariel and Elkanah are no less real assets than those built in Rama Gan or in Ein Harod.

To say that the expenditure on building them is a "total waste" – as Ya'acobi says – can only mean that Ya'acobi and his colleagues expect that one day the Jewish residents in Judea and Samaria will be driven out and their homes destroyed, just as the settlers planted by an Alignment government in the Yamit zone of Sinai were expelled – with Alignment acquiescence and encouragement.

In Ya'acobi's vision this fate would of course not befall the settlements established by the Alignment or with Alignment approval in the Jordan Valley or the Etzion bloc. Thus we are returned to the Labour Party's fatuous assumption that Jordan will make peace with Israel, leaving (in accordance with the "Allon Plan") a Jewish civilian and military presence along the Jordan and in the Etzion area, and, "of course" East Jerusalem under Israeli rule, while its own "West Palestinian" province will be demilitarized.

What can the Alignment leaders hope to achieve if they overthrow the government, form their own, and freeze settlement in Judea, Samaria and Gaza?

First – the approbation of President Reagan, whose "plan" lays down that such a freeze must precede negotiations with Jordan. Then, with a freeze in force, the Alignment – which expects to win the mandatory elections in 1985 – will be faced ostensibly with only two further requirements by Hussein for consenting to negotiate: fulfillment of his (and Reagan's) demand that Israel cancel her sovereignty over eastern Jerusalem – that is, include it in the "West Bank" package; and an Israeli undertaking to make also the future of existing settlements in the "occupied territory" a subject for negotiation.

Then, at best (if there are no other preconditions) Hussein will be prepared to negotiate for the fulfillment of the Reagan Plan, perhaps made more explicit by combination with the "Fez Plan." Both envisage or provide for a complete Israeli withdrawal to the 1949 Armistice Lines and the establishment of Arab sovereignty.

None of this is conjecture. It is all written. But nothing will come of all these plans and policies. They will bring neither peace treaties nor compromises.

All that would remain of an Alignment freezing of the settlements would be a weakened Jewish presence in Judea and Samaria, a blow to Israel's security – and the moral implication that a Zionist government itself recognizes that the Jewish presence in the heart of the Jewish homeland is something illicit, and the cause of the absence of peace.

There is much re-thinking to be done by Peres and his colleagues.