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## GOVERNMENT'S DUTY

NOT A SINGLE national interest was served by the decision of a government elected to serve the national interest, when it decided to release 1,150 terrorists, including hundreds of convicted murderers. On the contrary, it undermined every relevant national interest. It damaged the security of the people, its morale and its sense and image of sovereignty.

It has given, directly, a new lease of life to the Arab terrorist movement. Not only those freed but, perhaps even more significantly, the youth of the whole Arab people is now absorbing a campaign of inspirational propaganda, on Israel's moral weakness and indeed contemptibility, on the reduced risks for captured Arab heroes, on the assurance that there will always be available at least a handful of Israeli hostages from an Israel dominated by tearful mothers.

It is unfair to pretend that the decision was the first of its kind. The truth is more serious. Weakness in defending the national interest at the negotiating table has long been a notable strand in the fabric of the Israeli government.

ON THE VERGE of the Yom Kippur War, the Golda Meir government delayed the call-up of the reserves and rejected chief-of-staff David Elazar's proposal to execute a pre-emptive air attack. The enemy was to enjoy the advantages of complete surprise.

Added to earlier blunders within the defence establishment, these acts of omission facilitated the Egyptian crossing of the canal, maximized Israel's casualties, and helped create so critical a situation that the then-defence minister Moshe Dayan seriously considered a deep retreat.

The government's restraint was motivated by its belief that the "world" would thus be convinced beyond any doubt that the Arabs were the aggressors and would consequently take Israel to its bosom.

The incapacity of the government to understand how the mind of the "world" worked (specially a world busily kow-towing to Arab oil barons) or even to learn from Israel's own experience – in 1948 and 1967 – was amply demonstrated the next week when the nations of Europe refused to allow U.S. planes carrying supplies to a hard-pressed Israel even to refuel on their soil.

This was the backdrop to the astounding events that ended the war. The tables were turned. The IDF flung back the bulk of the Egyptian and Syrian armies and occupied large enclaves of Egypt and Syria. A crushing victory over the aggressors was within reach.

Then, with Sadat begging his Soviet sponsors to achieve a cease-fire, then-secretary of state Henry Kissinger saw his way into Sadat's heart. He made a compact with the Soviets and demanded peremptorily that Israel agree to an instant cease-fire.

Backed by the absolute moral advantage of a victim of aggression, driven by the heavy price it had paid in casualties (3,000 dead, four times as many, proportionately, as the American casualties in all the years of Vietnam), Israel's national interest called unequivocally for the assured victory which would surely cool Arab aggression, and ensure peace, for many years.

So clear was this need and this certainty that even Abba Eban – then foreign minister – questioned on the very eve of Kissinger’s demand, firmly rejected the notion of a cease-fire, insisted that victory, only victory, was the goal.

Thirty-six hours later the government, holding a powerful diplomatic hand, did not even delay its reply to Kissinger. It crumpled at once. There was no reason on earth for this self-inflicted defeat beyond Kissinger’s bullying rhetoric.

Even then, holding substantial territory inside Egypt (and Syria) Israel retained a tremendous advantage in negotiation. Whereupon Meir immediately proposed an exchange: Israel would withdraw from Egypt and Egypt would withdraw from the two strips it still held east of the canal: thus *status quo*, equal treatment for aggressor and victim.

Kissinger, in Sadat’s name, rejected the proposal out of hand. As though Israel was a defeated nation, he demanded Israel’s simple withdrawal from Egypt. As though Israel was a defeated nation, its government duly complied. The failure of will was complete.

FURTHER WITHDRAWALS in Sinai and on the Syrian front followed in the next 21 months. In each case, strategic positions previously described as vital were surrendered at Kissinger’s demand.

Today, after the release of the PLO terrorists, Israel’s chief negotiator, Shmuel Tamir, is reported to have claimed that it was impossible to withstand a mother’s tears. Ten and twelve years ago, the Israeli negotiators could not withstand Kissinger’s tantrums, nor his almost tearful hypocrisy: “You surely don’t believe that I, a Jew, could do anything to hurt the Jewish State.”

THE LIKUD government displayed an equal incapacity to stand firmly even by its minimal positions. An examination of the Begin peace plan of 1977 which, before any negotiation, had proclaimed an abandonment of almost all Israel’s security requirements in Sinai, shows how, step by step, Begin gave way – to the Americans and to Sadat – clause by clause until even the remaining Sinai safeguards he had proposed were abandoned and his “autonomy” plan was changed beyond recognition.

As for the peace treaty, with Sinai surrendered *in toto*, Sadat, by refusing to sign, extorted from Begin an amendment legitimizing a renewal of war by Egypt, a clause which Begin had initially declared turned the treaty into a “sham,” a “treaty for war, not for peace.”

A pattern was thus created: the national interest was shouldered aside for the diplomatic convenience of the negotiators (who could moreover afterwards flaunt the eternal apologia of the *schlemiel*: “There was no alternative”).

It was a pattern soon recognized by the “other side.” All you had to do to ensure Israel’s conceding even the most outrageous, unprecedented demands, was to stand pat on your opening positions and nonchalantly repeat “No” endlessly to Israel. Sooner or later Israel’s will would falter.

U.S. State Department veteran Harold Saunders once even explained to the Palestine Arabs in detail how such an Israel debacle could be contrived by a step-by-step “salami” process.

THE FAILURE of will in defending the national interest spilled over into the economic field. Israel's economic plight is traceable primarily to the simple fact that the Israeli public was taught by experience that the government would never stand firm on hard policies essential for the economic health of the nation if they were opposed vehemently and fiercely enough by one or another sector of society.

Most unreasonable strikes over the years were won because of a faltering government facing the unyielding defence of a sectional interest. Low productivity and an unwarrantably high standard of living were thus entrenched.

The Labour Alignment and the Likud alike demonstrated a lack of courage, a lack of stamina and a pandering to the appetites of every militant group prepared to exploit key positions in the economy to its own advantage.

FOR A TIME, Israel did stand firm in the face of terrorist blackmail, It did serve as an example to the world. And as long as it showed firmness, and wherever physically possible took military action against hijackers and kidnapers, the terrorists responded by keeping their demands within comparatively modest bounds.

The Labour government did sin on several occasions in negotiating with the terrorists, but in July 1976 its Entebbe operation raised steeply Israel's prestige and the people's morale.

When the Likud came to office, it proved that while it was capable, on the one hand, of carrying out the Litani military operation against the PLO, it was capable of outdoing the Labour Party in diplomatic bumbling. In 1979, it paid with 76 released terrorists for one Israeli civilian.

After 1979, the floodgates were opened. The price increased progressively. Negotiators, in effect, became couriers, delivering the terrorist leaders' demands. From 76-to-one in 1979, we reached 380-to-one in 1985.

ONLY A CONSCIOUS, radical change in the government's conception of its obligations to the nation and in its behaviour can put an end to the dangerous mindset which has established itself in the management of the affairs of an embattled Israel.

A vital element in such a change is the revival and maintenance of the principle of not negotiating with the terrorists. For cases where breach of the principle is unavoidable for purposes of "exchange," standing rules for negotiation must be laid down and must include a prohibition of negotiators' consultation with families of prisoners.

And crucial it is that, at least, Israel apply the law which permits the imposition of the death sentence for murder.