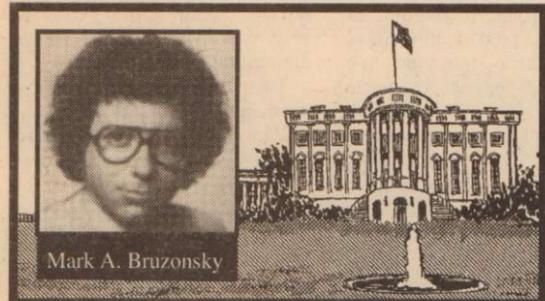


# ISRAELIS

From



Mark A. Bruzonsky

Washington

# IN FAR

# STRONGER POSITION

## THAN MANY ANALYSTS APPRECIATE

LAST week in this column the focus was on the unprecedented "Open Letter" to the US Congress sent by Leftist Israeli writers and intellectuals.

This unusual letter, key portions of which are reprinted here, advocates pressuring Israel to "freeze" settlements in the occupied territories in order to get the much discussed \$10 billion in "housing loan guarantees" for new Jewish immigrants.

As unique and courageous a step as this letter is -- certainly from the perspective of Israeli nationals -- the strategy it represents is not necessarily a wise one, nor is it likely to be a successful one. Indeed, it could backfire.

There's something of a popular political mythology rampant at the moment that the Israeli government of Yitzhak Shamir and his Likud Party is somehow being pressed into a tight corner.

If only it were so.

The political realities of life may, in fact, be just the opposite, even though it is politically expedient for just about everyone at the moment -- Americans, key Arab regimes, and the Israelis themselves -- to pretend otherwise.

The pretending is useful to all parties in power, at least for the time-being, in order to give sustenance and credibility to the widespread but misguided impression that serious political progress is likely, or at least reasonably possible, in coming months.

Especially in the wake of the destruction of Iraq, the Americans want to pretend they have instigated a serious "peace process" even though they have accomplished little and are unwilling to bring their client-state into line. The Israelis want to get more money and arms and are willing to play along, up to a point. And the Arab regimes want to cooperate with the Americans as their

options have become severely limited and their own credibility quite unstable.

Meanwhile, in the midst of this political stew and for all his stubbornness and lack of personal charisma, Yitzhak Shamir and his Likud Party are ever-tightening their grip over Israeli political life. Moreover they are doing so at the moment through a diplomatic game with the Arab regimes for which the Americans are being allowed to pretend to be the neutral matchmaker; when in fact, of course, the Americans are in reality more often than not doing Israel's bidding.

Just take a candid look at the realities of today's diplomatic and strategic situations in the Mid-east.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the destruction of Iraq, and the assertion of the United States as protector of the contemporary Arab order and the legitimacy of Arab regimes, the strategic situation has become far twisted in Israel's favour.

True, this might not remain so in coming decades; but for now at least it is an ever-present reality. This is so much the case, in fact, that while the diplomatic dancing continues speculations of a possible Israeli inspired Israeli-Syrian war are even now heard, especially in Israel itself. Next year, 1992, during the American presidential election period, might well be a good time if circumstances can be so manipulated.

Diplomatically, at least it certainly can be argued so, the Israelis are now positioned far better than would have been imaginable just a few years ago. For the things the Israelis are being "pressured" to yield on are the very things they want to focus to be on and the very things that are actually marginal to their major concerns.

And yet, at the same time,

the things that the Arab parties are increasingly expected to offer up in return for marginal Israeli concessions are basic and central -- recognition, an end to the boycott, direct negotiations, an end to UN oversight replaced by American.

Furthermore, the Americans have manoeuvred themselves in such a way that still increasing financial and military support to Israel is now seen as acceptable in many quarters and has been de facto accepted by the Arabs. In recent days the Kuwaiti ambassador in Washington has even been quoted as saying that Israel should also share in war reparations from Iraq -- more signs of the new times.

and so, under all these circumstances, there is a serious danger of the strategy of focusing on the upcoming congressional debate about more aid to Israel, and then legitimising this assistance if the Israelis simply "freeze" settlements, backfiring.

With just a few twists and turns -- and even these may not prove necessary in the end -- Shamir's government will get its "housing guarantees" and use them to further strengthen Israeli society and further weaken the already suffering Palestinians.

For as they have in the past, if pushed to the wall, the Israelis are now positioned to give -- and to look magnanimous for doing so -- on such matters as "freezing" temporarily the settlements while negotiations begin, talking about a "demilitarised" Golan Heights eventually returned to Syrian sovereignty, "allowing" a Palestinian from East Jerusalem to come to the talks.

And yet, even if the Israelis give on all of these matters, the central and historic issues of Palestinians national rights, control of the land and resources of the West Bank, and the huge flow of arms and money

*As you know, an Israeli request will be brought before you in September...for ten billion dollars in loan guarantees, for the purpose of absorbing the Soviet and Ethiopian Jewish immigrants in Israel.... Supporting these immigrants is a worthy humanitarian case; they certainly deserve a decent life in their new homeland, but this cannot be achieved in a country torn by conflict, where the daily life of everybody's becoming increasingly insecure. Or you, Members of the US Congress, rest a tremendous responsibility. It is within your power to make sure that your willingness, of which we have no doubt, to extend humanitarian aid to these immigrants not be turned against the principle of 'Land for Peace', which is the cornerstone of the administration's peace initiative, and with which we are in full agreement. The loan guarantees requested by Israel should therefore be made conditional upon the Israeli government's acceptance of that principle. Such acceptance should be manifested by an immediate cessation of all settlement activities, namely, setting up new settlements or expanding existing ones, within the occupied territories. Unless this condition is met by the Israeli government, you could never be sure that part of the money given for the absorption of immigrants would not in fact be used to accelerate the de facto annexation of territories subject to negotiations.*

*"We, like many other Israelis who deep in their hearts share our view, would regard the adoption of such a measure on your part as the greatest service the United States could render Israel at the present moment.*

--Open Letter

To Members of The American Congress recently sent by Israeli writers and intellectuals.

from the US, will all remain untouched. And by being untouched, Israel actually is strengthening its positions vis-a-vis these key issues.

As for settlements, what is frozen today can be unfrozen tomorrow -- it's happened before -- most memorably at the time of the first Camp David settlement. Furthermore, the Israelis already have so many settlements and have taken so much Palestinian land that they can just concentrate for a long time to come on what they have.

A "demilitarised" Golan Heights with all kinds of American and UN guarantees can keep everyone talking for a very long time -- and if the price is right, including an Egyptian-style peace with Syria paid for by the Americans and others, the Israelis can even eventually yield making something of a hero of Shamir as happened to Begin before him.

As for allowing Faisal Husseini to come to the new peace conference, that's not really that big a deal, no matter what the Israelis say about it. First of all, they have helped groom Husseini over the years precisely for this role. Secondly, Husseini will be said to be a resident of the West Bank where he has conveniently been build-

ing himself a house. And thirdly, the Israelis will have accomplished their major goal of denying the PLO a place in the talks and removing the subject of Palestinian nationalism from the agenda, having replaced it again with "autonomy".

And so, the following basic questions need to be asked of those serious about a real and comprehensive Israeli-Palestinian peace at this point:

Why are we all being so gentle on Israel, asking so little, giving so much in return?

Why are we willing to so easily trade billions of dollars to be used for settling more Jews in a still expanding Israel in return for what is likely to be only a temporary freezing of settlements -- especially when the Palestinians themselves are so urgently in need of help?

Why are we so willing to allow Shamir and his Likud the chance to exploit expectations of a Camp David II arrangement -- a situation that helps them believe they will have the additional years they need to still further crush the Palestinians, when in the alternative we could be holding firm for a just and equitable comprehensive settlement based on UN Security Council resolutions?

Whether we ask these questions now in public or just in private, history will.

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