

{APRIL 8 2006}

# THE BIG WINK

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**A**dvance and be recognized!” the recruit on sentry duty calls out when he hears somebody approaching. “Sergeant Johns!” comes the answer.  
“Advance and be recognized!” the sentry calls again. “I told you already, I’m Sergeant Johns!” comes the answer.  
“Advance and be recognized!” the sentry calls for the third time. “What do you think you are doing, you idiot!” the sergeant shouts.  
“Those are my orders,” the recruit replies, “To call ‘advance and be recognized’ three times and then to shoot.”

This is an old British army joke. It also happens to be the program of the government that is being formed in Israel.

Every Israeli government must have “Basic Guidelines”. True, they are not binding. All our governments have violated their Basic Guidelines on many occasions. But tradition and good manners demand that there be Basic Guidelines and that they be put on the table of the Knesset, together with the coalition agreements that set out the division of the spoils, the really important bit.

The true aim of the Basic Guidelines is to attract those whom the Prime Minister wants to have in his government, and to repel all others.

A true leader will want to set up a coalition that will enable him to realize his vision. But a Prime Minister who is a politician – and nothing but a politician – is simply interested in a coalition that makes life easier for himself.

Ehud Olmert is of the second kind. He wants to lie in the middle of the bed, between a rightist partner and a leftist one, preferably of roughly equal size. That will provide him with a stable government. When promoting a “leftist” cause, his party’s ministers, together with the leftist ministers, will have a majority in the cabinet without their rightist colleagues; when promoting a “rightist” agenda, he will have a majority without the leftists. Simple logic.

At present, it’s an easy matter. The leftist partner will be Labor (probably with 6 ministers), the rightist will be composed of Shas, the Orthodox and the Lieberman

party (probably 7 ministers together). The Pensioners (probably 2 ministers) will be in the middle. The Kadima ministers (probably 10) will always be able to construct a majority for the government, sometimes with the rightists, sometimes with the leftists. Olmert hopes that this will make life easy for him for the entire period of the new Knesset, until November 2010.

The Basic Guidelines will reflect this goal. They must make it possible for Amir Peretz, Eli Yishai and Avigdor Lieberman to join a government that will include real leftists, extreme religious fundamentalists and complete fascists.

Even the prophet Isaiah did not dare to dream of that. His ambitions were satisfied by the wolf lying down with the lamb.

Isaiah knew that this vision could come true only after the appearance of the Messiah. Olmert, far from being a Messiah, is only a clever politician. He has to do without divine intervention.

Lieberman wants Israel to be free of Arabs - Araber-rein in German. For this end he is ready to relinquish whole areas of Israel which are inhabited by Arab citizens, annexing, in return, large stretches of the West Bank. Amir Peretz, in contrast, wants to accord full equality to Israel's Arab citizens. Peretz wants to conduct negotiations with the Palestinian authority, Lieberman wants to destroy it. The Orthodox demand that the state pay forever for the upkeep of tens of thousands of Yeshiva (religious seminary) students, who do not want to work at all. Labor wants to raise the wages of productive workers. And so on, infinitely. And Olmert himself wants, of course, to realize his "Convergence Plan", which means that Israel will "unilaterally" fix its "permanent borders", without agreement and partnership with the Palestinians.

What to do? One has to stitch together Basic Guidelines that everyone can agree to. Impossible? On the contrary. Nothing easier. One needs only a good Jewish lawyer - and we have plenty of these.

In the Basic Guidelines, no mention of the "Convergence Plan" will be made, neither will the word "unilaterally" occur. They will say only that the government will act according to the speech made by Olmert after the closing of the ballots on election day. That is supposed to satisfy everyone.

There are now three camps in Israel:

(a) Those who want real negotiations with the Palestinians in order to realize the Two-States solution.

(b) Those who want a "unilateral" withdrawal, with the intent of annexing parts of the West Bank and leaving what's left to the Palestinians, after removing any settlements there.

(c) Those who oppose such a "unilateral" withdrawal, under the pretext that it

“gives” the Palestinians territories without getting anything in return. That doesn’t mean that they actually want to reach an agreement with the Palestinians, but, on the contrary, that they want to avoid giving up any territory at all.

Amir Peretz belongs to the first camp, Olmert to the second, Lieberman and Shas to the third. The Basic Guidelines must satisfy them all.

How? The answer lies in the British joke.

The Basic Guidelines will say that first of all, Israel will call upon the Palestinians to make peace based on the Two-State Solution. Only after it becomes clear that there is no partner for such a peace, will Israel take its fate in its own hands (meaning: fix its borders unilaterally). In his election day speech, Olmert addressed Mahmoud Abbas directly, with resounding pathos, offering to start peace negotiations.

(That reminds me of something: After the 1956 war, a friend of mine interrogated a high-ranking Egyptian prisoner, who told him that they used to listen to David Ben-Gurion’s speeches on the radio. Every time Ben-Gurion announced that “We are stretching out our hands for peace”, the Egyptians put their forces on high alert. In a way, it’s an Israeli inversion of the Roman proverb *si vis pacem, para bellum* - if you want peace, prepare for war.)

Olmert’s offer to Mahmoud Abbas is accompanied with a huge wink for the Israeli public. Everybody understands that this is a phase we have to pass through before coming to the real thing. It is a multi-purpose maneuver: to provide Peretz with a fig-leaf when he is asked to support unilateral steps, to satisfy the Americans when they are requested to agree to the annexation of large parts of the West Bank, and also to give Lieberman and Shas a year or two to enjoy themselves in the government, before Olmert starts implementing the Convergence Plan (if that ever happens).

Notice: Nobody, but absolutely nobody, is discussing the offer to Mahmoud Abbas, while everybody is talking about the annexation that will come afterwards.

Like that British sentry: Call once, twice, a third time - and then shoot.

Still, there remains the question: how can Amir Peretz and his colleagues sit in the government together with a person like Lieberman?

Lieberman is a man of the extreme-extreme Right. He could give lessons to Jean-Marie Le Pen and Joerg Haider. He is the sole leader of his party, his talk is violent and brutal, his message racist. He openly proclaims that his aim is to get all the Arab citizens out of Israel.

Before the elections, Peretz promised that he would not sit in the government with Lieberman. Since then two things have happened:

First, the leader of the left-wing Meretz party, Yossi Beilin, invited Lieberman to a well-publicized breakfast at his home, consuming (according to the gleeful reporters)

“juicy herrings” and enthusiastically lauding Lieberman’s personal qualities. In this way he accorded legitimization to this person, who until then was considered beyond the political pale.

Then, after the elections, an even more disgraceful thing happened. Peretz’ people declared that he, not Olmert, was going to head the next government. It was to be a “social coalition”, without Kadima. Simple arithmetic shows that such a coalition must include not only Shas, but also the National Union, the settlers’ party that competes with Lieberman in racism. This ploy conferred legitimacy on the entire racist right. If extremists like Benny Eilon and Effi Eitam are kosher, why not Lieberman?

How could this happen to Peretz? It was clearly a hasty reaction to the behavior of Kadima. Immediately after the elections, Olmert should have called Peretz and proclaimed him his favored partner. Instead, Olmert’s people started to humiliate Peretz and declare him unfit for the post of Minister of Finance, which he craved. Furious, Peretz started the move in order to get back at Olmert and frighten him. Understandable, but unforgivable. It was a personal response, and one which has caused huge damage. It has legitimized Lieberman as a candidate for membership in the government. It has also infuriated the Arab citizens and created the impression that Peretz may not be such a staunch fighter for peace after all.

All this is worrisome. True, the next government could hardly be worse than the Likud government. The question is whether it will be much better. But surely it will be adept at winking in all directions.