

# Political Commander: Ehud Bank

By Kenneth W. Stein

When asked about chances for a Camp David type summit, my friend, the grizzled Israeli Arab affairs correspondent who sought anonymity, told me, "Barak is giving it all away in advance. This next summit, whenever it happens, will be for all the marbles — all the tough issues are going to be discussed. And after it is over, he will take the agreement to the people in a referendum."

It was not pessimism so much as heightened uncertainty that characterized the tone in his voice. And this from a rather optimistic observer with more than a quarter-century of intimate experience of watching American mediators come and go to the Prime Minister's office. I disagreed with him about how Barak is handling the pre-negotiations.

Why the jellied anxiety? For Israelis, moments of truth are lurking. This is not the uncertain weeks and months prior to Jimmy Carter's Camp David with Sadat and Begin twenty plus years ago; this uncertainty is different.

### Few Similarities to 1978

Another southern governor turned president, fine. But this is almost where the similarity ends.

Barak is no Begin, Arafat is no Sadat, and Clinton is no Carter. Now, there is a second term president with a track record of being Israel's best friend; then, there was Carter whose public diplomacy and willingness to push Israel into unwanted corners prior to the September 1978 summit caused then Foreign Minister Dayan to worry about how Carter's possible pressure would be applied to Begin.

Everyone knew that Begin would talk about trading Sinai if he did not have to talk about the West Bank and Gaza. Barak is not only talking about the West Bank and Gaza in advance of the talks, he has undertaken the courageous, though contrary to my friendly correspondent's misgivings: in advance of the summit, breaking the most sensitive negotiating eggs.

### Israeli Press Full of Rumor

In the last several weeks, the Israeli press has been full of rumor that Barak needed and wanted a summit.

Arafat was clamoring for all to

hear that he would settle for nothing less than full Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank and Gaza, the removal of all the settlements, the return of the Palestinian refugees, and establishment of Jerusalem as the capital of the Palestinian state.

Maybe Barak, while giving everyone the belief that he wanted a summit now was perfectly willing to have his own foreign minister criticize him publicly while his office over the last several weeks systematically leaked the details of a final agreement with Arafat and the Palestinian authority.

### Superb Soldier -- Not a Wise Politician

Israeli commentators repeatedly laud Barak for being a superb soldier, but not a wise politician. Criticism of his style in decision-making is that he consults few, moves stealth-like and takes on the motto of Israeli generals: "follow-me." Maybe so. But just maybe, he is also much more clever than Israeli analysts are willing to credit him.

We know he postponed his meeting with Clinton in May because he knew he would have to withdraw Israeli troops from southern Lebanon in advance of his promised July deadline. Then, the reason for him not going to Washington was leaked; Barak wanted to avoid being pressured by a friendly Bill Clinton. Wrong. He wanted to stay in Israel and oversee the fast-paced withdrawal from Lebanon, which, by the way, occurred without an Israeli soldier getting scratched, and since the withdrawal, Hizbollah, at least for the time being, had coincidentally kept its powder dry. Was that part of the scenario pre-arranged with folks in Syria and in the Lebanese national hierarchy? If so, there was little luck attached to Barak's pre-emptive withdrawal; in hindsight it looks like a calculated effort on his part. The Israeli public was ready; they lead, he followed.

Back to Arafat via the Golan. If Barak knows how difficult it was for Israelis to swallow a withdrawal from the Golan in a Syrian-Israeli agreement, he also knows how difficult it is for the Israeli public to accept making certain compromises with the Palestinians, so he has publicly

introduced those compromises in order to give the Israeli public a chance to digest them. If so, then Barak learned well the lessons from the attempted resumption of talks with the Syrians late last year and in January.

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### Is He Helping Stabilize Bashar's Rule?

Barak cannot but be pleased that Assad, before his death, made a big deal of demanding all of the land around the Sea of Galilee returned to Syria in some final agreement. So when the Israeli population not only hiccupped but practically choked on the idea of a full withdrawal from the Golan Heights, at least according to polling data, Barak could only be pleased that Assad was viewed as being hard line. Ending those talks with a deal with Assad before he died might have violated key Israeli security concerns (land and water) but would also have ended Barak's tenure as prime minister. And what better success for Bashar to be credited with the Golan's return? Is Barak that clever to be willing to not only insure Israeli security concerns on the Golan, but also help Bashar stabilize his rule in Syria?

As June wore on to conclusion, we learned that Barak was willing to return 90% of the West Bank, that an Israeli capital in Jerusalem would also be a Palestinian capital but on its eastern outskirts, that some settlements would be withdrawn but most were going to stay in place, and that a contiguous Palestinian state would come into being. Barak has said Israel will stay in control of the Jordan River Valley for a decade with no heavy military allowed by the new Palestinian state in its area and only a minuscule number of Palestinian refugees will be able to exercise the right of return.

Now, the next Camp David

summit is taking place as we go to press. Until it started, you can be sure that the prime minister's office was doing its own private polling of Israeli public opinion to detect trends in what is and is not acceptable to Israeli public opinion, according to the details now before the Israeli public.

### How Far He is Willing to Go

Barak has told Arafat and Clinton and now the Israeli public what his security lines are; he has, in advance of any final agreement with the Palestinians, let it be known how far he is willing to go. But both Clinton and Arafat, and maybe even Assad knew too before his death, what was or was not possible for the Israeli public to swallow.

Just maybe Barak is smarter than most are willing to give him credit. The general knows the soldiers will follow; with the politicians you can never be sure, and the public must always be consulted with their temperature taken periodically.

Barak certainly rearranged his domestic house in June. He insured his ruling coalition's longevity with a compromise with Shas; he kept Meretz supporting the government, but not in the cabinet, and then he tried to bring in other members of like-mind into his cabinet.

### Plenty of Time

Barak, I would argue, learned from Bibi Netanyahu's mistake. Netanyahu signed the Wye Agreement in 1998 but could not sell it to his Parliament. Barak is not only making sure, or at least trying to be sure that his cabinet and coalition stay in place, but that what is finally offered to the

Israeli public does not end his political career earlier than he wanted.

What Barak has that neither Clinton nor Arafat enjoy is time. Clinton faces the absolute end of office, the other, the inevitable end of life. It is Arafat who has been to three funerals of contemporaries in eighteen months.

Barak could turn out to be quite a politician and in Israeli terms, perhaps one with longevity. ✪

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## JCC's United Way Grant

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arise and are articulated."

As a member agency, the Jewish Community Center will begin to sponsor a United Way campaign among its leadership, staff and constituents. President Menaker put out this early call to all Jewish Community Center members and supporters: "We are now a very formal part of the network that assures that our city provides the comprehensive set of services that is necessary to build an inclusive and compassionate community. I believe that we at the Jewish Community Center have something special to offer to

this effort programmatically. And, I hope we, the Jewish community of Charlotte, also have something to offer financially to both the campaign of the Jewish Federation of Greater Charlotte and to the fund raising efforts of the United Way of Central Carolinas. I hope everyone in our community will find a way to participate in both drives."

Executive Director Feldman concludes that, "The United Way Board of Directors stands at the pinnacle of our city's leadership community. We sincerely appreciate not only the financial underwriting that United Way membership brings, but also the heartfelt "vote of confidence" that the Board has communicated via this decision." ✪

**"To acquire money requires valor; to keep money requires prudence; and to spend money well is an art."**

— Auerbach, Landhaus am Rhein

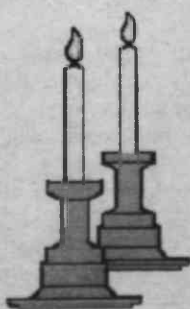
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