

The Molten Three

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I MUST ADMIT that Moshe “Bogie” Ya’alon did not top the list of my favorite politicians. The former army Chief of Staff and present Minister of Defense looked to me like a mere lackey of Netanyahu and a one-dimensional militarist. Many people call him a “bock”, a non-complimentary German-Yiddish term for billy goat.

Yuval Steinitz, the present minister for I-don’t-know-what, was also not at the top of the list of politicians I admire. He, too, seemed to me one of the servants of Netanyahu, without a recognizable personality of his own.

Even the former army Chief of Staff, Gabi Ashkenazi, was not one of my ultimate heroes. When he was appointed, some malicious people claimed that he owed his advancement to his Oriental origin, since the Minister of Defense, at the time, was also of Oriental origin. Ashkenazi’s father was from Bulgaria, his mother from Syria. The Minister of Defense at the time, Shaul Mofaz, was from Iran. Ashkenazi was in charge of one of the serial wars against Gaza. He was and remains popular.

Now I admire all three. More than that, I am deeply grateful to all three.

WHAT HAS brought about such a profound change?

It was caused by another former army Chief of Staff, Ehud Barak.¹

Barak has been a Chief of Staff, a Defense Minister and a Prime Minister. Since he was replaced by Binyamin Netanyahu, he is in private business—giving advice to foreign governments. He has become very rich, and doesn’t hide it. Far from it.

He grew up in a kibbutz. Since he was a fattish boy without athletic ability, who played the piano, his life there was not easy. When he was called up like everybody else, he seemed far from a military career.

But a senior commando officer noticed his intelligence and decided to push him on. He accepted him into his select unit—the renowned Sayeret Matkal (“General Staff commando”), where he advanced quickly both for his physical bravery and his outstanding intelligence.

Early on, a high-ranking officer drew my attention to him.

“Watch Barak,” he advised, “he is extremely intelligent

¹If this gives the impression that Israel abounds with former Chiefs of Staff, that is an exaggeration. But we are indeed amply supplied with them.

and one of these days he is going to be Chief of Staff!”

Years later, I got a surprise phone call. I was at the time the editor of a popular news magazine and a Member of the Knesset, profoundly disliked by the establishment. I was told on the phone that General Barak, the Deputy Chief of Staff, was inviting me for a talk in his office.

I wondered what the reason might be, but there was no reason. The general just wanted to have a conversation with me.

So we talked for about an hour and hit a subject of joint interest: military history. Since World War II, that has been my hobby. (Some people joked that I was the only militaristic pacifist they knew.) We talked about the Thirty Years War and other campaigns, and I was impressed. He knew his stuff and was obviously an intellectual person—qualities that are quite rare in our officers’ corps, which tends to be rather pragmatic.

After that I hardly met him. He disappointed me as a Prime Minister, messed up the Camp David conference and was beaten at the following election by Netanyahu. He became Minister of Defense in the coalition government.

NOW HE has surged back into prominence with startling disclosures.

It appears that Barak has written a book of memoirs. On the eve of publication, he has given an interview in which he disclosed the most intimate details of government discussions. The subject: an Israeli attack on the nuclear installations of Iran.

According to Barak, the three central members of the government—Netanyahu, Barak and the Foreign Minister, Avigdor Lieberman, had decided by 2009 to unleash the Israeli Air Force and destroy the Iranian installations, a very daring and complex operation.

To make this decision, they needed the endorsement of the military and a resolution of the “eight”—an unofficial committee of the eight central ministers. Under Israeli law, the government as a whole is the Commander in Chief of the armed forces. The government has delegated this power to the “Cabinet”, a more restricted forum. This body, in turn, has unofficially empowered an even smaller committee, the “Eight”.

In 2009, the three leading ministers—Netanyahu, Barak and Lieberman—decided that the time had come to attack Iran. It was a momentous decision, but at the last moment Ashkenazi informed them that the military was not ready. The matter had to be postponed.

The next year, the three tried again. This time, the situation was more auspicious. The Chief of Staff informed them—though in rather grudging terms—that the military was ready. The Eight had to decide.

Four members were in favor. Two, both Likud members, were opposed. There remained two: Ya'alon and Steinitz. Netanyahu undertook to convince them. Both were his personal loyalists. Netanyahu spoke with each of them at length, and then put the operation to the vote.

To Barak's uttermost surprise and disgust, at the crucial moment both these ministers voted against. In Barak's language: "They just melted!"

Without a majority—four against four—there was no decision. The world-shaking event did not happen.

A year later, the subject was brought up again. But this time there was another obstacle: joint maneuvers of the Israeli and US armies were in progress. In such a situation, an attack was impossible, since it would have been blamed on the US.

Thus the opportunity passed. Diplomacy (an almost dirty word in Israel) took over.

TELLING THE story, Barak blamed the two melting weaklings, Ya'alon and Steinitz, as well as the army high command, for this chain of events. For him, it was a demonstration of what amounted to cowardice in the face of the enemy.

A furious debate broke out in Israel. As usual in our country, it centered on secondary details, so as to avoid the main ones.

Point No. 1: How could these super-secret stories be published at all? We have in Israel a very strict military censorship. Breaking its rules can land one in prison. Yet all those involved in this publication asserted that the censors allowed it.

How? Why? Details of the innermost workings of the army high command and the most secret cabinet deliberations?

Point No. 2: Was Netanyahu really totally committed to the attack? Did he really put the maximum pressure on his two most devoted ministers to get them to vote the right way?

Netanyahu has practically staked his whole political career on the Iran bomb. He has declared many times that the very existence of Israel is involved. How could he allow the private considerations—moral or otherwise—of two ministers he probably does not respect very much to

endanger the very existence of the nation?

I have a lurking suspicion that Netanyahu had his own secret doubts about the operation, and was unconsciously rather relieved that it was obstructed by his underlings.

BUT THE real questions are far more consequential. If the two ministers had not "melted", what would have happened?

To my mind, a catastrophe.

If the army (which in Israel includes the Air Force) had such profound misgivings, they probably had good reason. To do the job, the airplanes had to get there, locate, hit and destroy the various dispersed underground nuclear installations and come safely back. Not an easy task.

We assume that we have an excellent Air Force, as well as excellent intelligence agencies. But even so, it would have been a very risky thing to do.

How do you get there? It's either the long way all around the Arabian peninsula to the Persian Gulf, or the straight way over Jordan or Syria and Iraq, or from the sea through Turkey and perhaps the former Soviet republics. All this without being detected by Iran and its allies.

Once near your targets, you have to locate the exact underground installations and destroy them, while being subject to intense anti-aircraft missile and artillery fire. If there are casualties, what do you do? Just leave them there?

And the way back may be even more difficult than the way there.

AND THAT is only the military side, the one that obviously worried Ashkenazi and his officers.

What about the political consequences?

Iran would certainly have blamed the US and its Arab allies. The first response would have been the blocking of the Hormuz Strait, the narrow waterway through which almost all the oil of Saudi Arabia, the other Gulf States, Iraq and Iran flows. The effect on the world economy would have been disastrous, with the price of oil skyrocketing beyond imagination.

Rockets of all kinds and origins, launched by Iran, Hizbollah and Hamas, would have rained down on Israel. The lives of all of us would have been in extreme jeopardy. Since I live quite close to the army high command, in the center of Tel Aviv, I might not have been writing this.

The entire region, as well as the world economy, would have been thrown into chaos, with everybody blaming Israel. And that would have been only the beginning.

SO I am profoundly grateful to Ya'alon, Steinitz and Ashkenazi.

I am very sorry about what I have thought about you in the past, and now think the very opposite.

Thank you!