

“The Intransigent Israeli?”

A Document from the Archives of the
British Foreign Office (FCO/17 1554)

Shmuel Bar

Shmuel Bar is Director of Studies at the Institute of Policy and Strategy of the Lauder School of Government, Diplomacy and Strategy, IDC Herzliya.

The following document is a candid report to the British Foreign Office by its then-ambassador in Tel Aviv, Sir Ernest John Ward Barnes (John Barnes). Barnes served in Israel between 1972–1975—a period spanning the efforts to promote a ceasefire to the War of Attrition, the Rogers Plan, the Yom Kippur War and the subsequent Disengagement Agreement.

Being a professional diplomat, Ambassador Barnes followed the British tradition of reporting his observations to the Foreign Office. This document provides insight not only into what he, himself, thought about the Israeli–Arab conflict but also, indirectly, into the conventional wisdom of that era regarding the “peace-loving Arabs and intransigent Israelis.” Barnes’ key observation, as is evident in the document, was that Israel is more flexible than meets the eye; however, for historic reasons, the Jewish state must remain vigilant. The arguments raised by Barnes will look familiar to the observer of Israel’s relations with the international community in 2009: the double standard regarding Israeli actions vs. those of its enemies; the seeming lack of understanding in the West of the fatal consequences of an Israeli strategic defeat; Israel’s amateurish public diplomacy; the lack of appreciation of all Israeli concessions; and the expectation that Israel, as the stronger party, should offer more concessions.

Undoubtedly, the document reflects the time in which it was composed—four years after the Six-Day War. The author, a career diplomat, was witness to the events that led up to the outbreak of the war and mentions them in his letter. To him, therefore, Israel remains the “offended party” and not the aggressor. It would be hard to find a diplomat in service today who was active then and personally recalls the events leading up to June 1967; therefore, much of the background that Barnes mentions may be seen by a modern diplomatic observer as historical trivia at best, but certainly not relevant to Israel’s current political positions. Perhaps one of the causes of the cognitive dissonance and frustration with which many Israelis regard Western diplomacy can be attributed to the disparity between, on the one hand, Israel’s view, formed (as Barnes points out) by the experience of the Holocaust and reinforced by Arab efforts to destroy the State of Israel, and on the other, the prevailing Western notion of Israel as a powerful entity under no existential threat from whom most of the concessions must be demanded.

100 17/1557

Near Eastern Dept.
NER 1/2
Departmental Series No. 5

REGISTRY No. 10
20/11/1971
NER 1/3

BRITISH EMBASSY
TEL AVIV

(1)

CONFIDENTIAL

18th November, 1971

THE INTRANSIGENT ISRAELI?

SUMMARY

- Peace-loving Arabs and intransigent Israelis? (paragraph 1).
2. Exasperating Israelis, yes (paragraph 2).
 3. But there are reasons for this, based on history and the situation in which Israel finds herself (paragraphs 3-6).
 4. Even if she seems intransigent, this may well be more apparent than real (paragraphs 7-8).
 5. Israel cannot make all the concessions and in fact she has shown a surprisingly accommodating attitude (paragraphs 9-10).
 6. What would you do in her place? (paragraph 11).

CONFIDENTIAL

18th November, 1971

THE INTRANSIGENT ISRAELI?

Sir,

If La Fontaine were living at this hour, he would undoubtedly write a fable on the peace-loving Arab and the intransigent Israeli. It is not for anyone writing from this post to assess the strength of the Arab love for peace, whether it be Eros or Agape, an over-mastering passion or a gentle affection. But one may perhaps offer some thoughts on the question of Israeli intransigence.

2. The Israelis are of course their own worst enemies. Only too often one is convinced of the strength of their case until one hears them expound it. They also talk far too much. No doubt teaching is endless repetition. But by constantly repeating their own line, notably on conditions for peace, they box themselves in and make the way to the negotiating table harder for themselves as well as for others. They are also too inclined freely to attribute motives

The Right Honourable

Sir Alec Douglas-Home, K.T., M.P.

- 1 -

CONFIDENTIAL

● to other countries in public. By airing their views so loudly and so frequently on anything which happens, they give unpalatable events quite unnecessary publicity, even from their own point of view, and they block their opponent into a corner from which retreat is harder. Many critical United Nations resolutions would have passed well-nigh unnoticed if the Israelis had not blown them up into international tragedies. Mr. Rogers' six points might even have been nine-days' wonders if the Israelis had not nailed them to his mast.

3. All this is exasperating. To some extent it is the product of special circumstances. Someone, I think it was Lord Crewe, once said that the late nineteenth century in English politics was an era of great men and small events. The present time in Israel is an era of old men, and women, and new events. The world has become more complex for these immigrants from Central and Eastern Europe. The old pioneering Zionist formulae no longer apply. The future cannot easily be interpreted in terms of the past. As the arteries harden, flexibility is also harder to

- 2 -
CONFIDENTIAL

● achieve.

4. Flexibility too is always easier for a dictator, who can change his tune overnight, than it is for a democratically-elected coalition. The divisions of the Zionist past are sharply reflected in the party structure of Israel today. Once a coalition line, as opposed to a party line, has been established, and that is by no means always easy, it tends to become sanctified by constant reiteration. Each member of the coalition is eagerly watching for deviations by others from the line. Agreement to preserve the status quo is easier to achieve than agreement to change it. It is therefore not surprising that new departures of policy often take a long time in gestation. This was particularly evident at the time of the cease-fire of August 1970, when the former coalition actually split.

5. But when we are irritated by Israel's apparent rigidity, when we are inclined to think that she and she alone is holding up progress, when we judge that the time she has consumed is working against her, other factors are also

- 3 -
CONFIDENTIAL

● worth some thought. On the basic issue, first, it is not Israel who is denying the Arabs' right to exist. Nor was it Israel who attacked the Arabs in the first place when the British mandate was withdrawn, or whose blood-curdling threats led to war twice since. It was not Israel who before or after 1967 kept up pinpricks on her neighbours, thereby forcing them to fight on three fronts at once. These are tendentious comments, perhaps. But it is certainly a truism to say that if Israel lost a war, she would not, unlike the opposition, live to fight another.

6. Her attitudes spring from deeper historical roots too. A people which has been pushed around the world for two thousand years does not intend to be pushed around any more. Nor is it only ancient history which produces the Massada complex of total resistance, death rather than dishonour. The memories of persecution, and above all of Hitler's holocaust, are much nearer the surface. These people in their own lifetimes have moved round the world, often only a step or two ahead of their pursuers. It is perhaps not always realised, too, that Judaism, though once a religion

- 4 -
CONFIDENTIAL

● of priest-kings, has through the centuries become a religion of the socially underprivileged, to use modern jargon, scraping a living in their ghettos. It is a far cry from the development of Christianity in the opposite sense, from Galilean peasants to the papal pomp of Rome and the squirearchical overtones of the Church of England. Be that as it may, many Israelis feel oppression in their bones and instinctively resent and resist anything which strikes them as paternalistic or patronising. They are no longer prepared to touch their forelocks or their sidecurls.

7. But this may sound like an apologia for intransigence, not a rebuttal of the charge. If there are many reasons for them to show intransigence, the question is whether in fact they are so intransigent. They often, it is true, use negative formulae. The famous reply to Dr. Jarring's memorandum of the 8th of February this year is the prime example. But after the Six Day War, they were ready for peace and expecting it. In August 1970, they made substantial concessions: acceptance of

- 5 -
CONFIDENTIAL

● indirect negotiations, of a temporary cease-fire and of an element of external responsibility for a solution. Even in the present situation, they are ready to make a withdrawal without peace. They have thus already eaten many of their own words. Not is it a Jewish Shylock who is insisting on his full pound of flesh: on total withdrawal from the occupied territories as the precondition of negotiation. Is that not intransigence? Or is it intransigent to offer free discussion of all points at issue in a direct negotiation and to be prepared for adjustments by mutual agreement?

8. Even the occupation itself, which is often cited as a sign of intransigence, has another aspect. It is already accepted by international observers, such as the Red Cross, as the mildest occupation in history. Now the Israelis have come to realise that the inhabitants of the administered territories cannot be left indefinitely in limbo. There must be an adjustment to realities and long-term decisions must be taken. This has had some harsh short-term effects in the Gaza strip, but it could well lead to better conditions there than the hapless refugees have known for twenty years.

- 6 -
CONFIDENTIAL

● In the West Bank, where material conditions are good, the present trend is apparently towards more devolution. This too may only be the first stage of a more far-reaching process.

9. All this suggests that the intransigence is often more apparent than real. It is largely a case of fortiter in modo, suaviter in re. However infuriating we often find the Israelis, we must not expect too much from them. Just because they seem more rational, more European than the Arabs, we tend to set them higher standards. There is no harm in this, and they would not object on a philosophical level. But we cannot carry it too far. We cannot expect Israel to make all the concessions, to break all the deadlocks.

10. The Israelis after all know the Arabs at least as well as we do. Over the years they have had little cause to expect the hand of friendship if they turn the other cheek. In recent months, they have had good reason to doubt whether President Sadat, after his early promise, has really thrown off the old Adam of Nasserism. They

- 7 -
CONFIDENTIAL

● have had ample evidence not only of the shifting sands of Arab politics, with which they are expected to come to terms, and of the violence of Arab methods, in which they are supposed to put their trust. In these circumstances it is surely to their credit that they have been ready to work for a canal agreement which, to begin with, offers so much to Egypt and so little to themselves and to see it as a step to further withdrawal. What is surprising is not that they ask for reassurances, but that, in the face of Egyptian fire-eating, Russian bluster, American indecision and other people's lukewarmness, they have not asked for more.

11. Time and again, in considering the Israelis, I come back to the thought: "What would you do in their place?" They are often maddening. But their national interests are much more at stake than ours. No doubt the Middle East looks very different from opposite ends of the telescope. But when they prevaricate, procrastinate or retaliate, it is usually easy to understand them and often hard to blame them. What would you do in their place?

12. I am sending copies of this despatch to Her Majesty's Representatives at Washington, Paris, Moscow,

CONFIDENTIAL

Cairo, Amman and Beirut, to the Permanent United Kingdom Representative to the United Nations at New York, to the Commander, British Forces, Near East, and to Her Majesty's Consul-General at Jerusalem.

I have the honour to be,
With the highest respect,
Sir,
Your obedient Servant,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'J. M. ...', written over a horizontal line.