

Racing against the Clock

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The formative years of Ehud Barak's career in the military were as a phenomenal soldier and as the head of Israel's *sayeret matkal*, the country's elite commando force. With a reputation as strong as it is secret, the *sayeret* is often obliquely called by its nickname, simply *ha'yehida* — "the unit." Its soldiers often go behind enemy lines, and their task is, quite bluntly, to get the job done. How they succeed is less significant than that they succeed, and often their methods are highly individualistic. Unlike tank or infantry commanders, who must rely on teamwork, *sayeret* soldiers are accustomed to working alone.

There can be no doubt that Prime Minister Barak, steeped in the *sayeret* tradition, is carrying on alone. Having been abandoned by his parliamentary base, many of his cabinet members, and more than half of the Israeli public, his lonely determination to pursue a highly controversial peace deal has been unflinching. Barak's ability to withstand the criticism of so many — including close friends — is illuminated by three people who have clearly influenced his thinking.

The first is Israel's founding father, David Ben-Gurion. Barak, an avid reader of Ben-Gurion's diaries, has called him "the greatest Jew of this millennium." In Ben-Gurion, Barak sees a brainy leader with an autocratic governing style. Barak loves Ben-Gurion's vision, his utter self-confidence and *chutzpah* in making major decisions virtually alone. Barak approvingly cites Ben-Gurion: "He used to say, 'I don't know what the people want, but I know what is needed by the people of Israel.' "

Public displeasure Similarly, Barak may not know what the people want. Making his own political life harder by avoiding an alliance with his right-wing adversaries, Barak still holds out hope that a peace accord will catapult him to re-election February 6. Yet, so far, a deal seems more likely to sink him. Polls show that 61 percent of Israelis say he has no mandate to negotiate now as a caretaker of a minority government, and 57 percent charge he is negotiating hastily in hopes of being re-elected. A sizable number of Israelis — and American Jews — believe he has conceded too much to the Palestinians, particularly in light of what appears to be a Palestinian deal-breaker: the right-of-return demands for some 3.5 million refugees and their descendants.

This all sets Barak apart from Ben-Gurion who, according to biographer Shabtai Tevet, was a "very shrewd politician." Yet there can be little doubt that Barak does represent Ben-Gurion's mainstream strand of Zionism, which always elevated the feasible over the desirable.

A second personality key to understanding Barak's doggedness is his mentor, assassinated Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. As protégé to the crusty ex-general, Barak, while serving as military chief of staff, used to pay weekend visits in jeans to Rabin's house. Barak was almost always at Rabin's side, offering him advice. Like Rabin, Barak regards peace with the Palestinians as a strategic imperative and sees time running short before a nuclear-armed Iran and a resurgent Iraq alter the regional balance. Indeed, their speeches often carry the same motif, namely that a peace deal holds the best chance for ending the role of the general as the messenger of tragedy. Barak told Israel's daily Yediot Ahronot two weeks ago, "I have seen too many people killed alongside me. I have gone to the homes of too many widows and orphans. . . . I have to be able to look into the eyes of every mother and say we have done everything possible to avoid a new tragedy of a needless war."

There is also evidence of a non-Israeli who looms large in Barak's mind: Bill Clinton. The two have enjoyed a warm relationship over the past year and a half. The president reportedly has spoken more to Barak over the phone than to any other foreign leader during this period. While Clinton believes that Barak needs to work toward a personal rapport with Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat, the two believe that reason can ultimately prevail. As one White House official put it, "Both the president and Barak share the belief that if smart people think about a problem long enough, you can come up with the solution to any problem. But, sometimes, that is not enough."

Indeed, it may not be enough. Clinton has never had to persuade Americans to make peace amid violence and convince his compatriots that a conflict was on the verge of being over when people could see only blood, hatred, and broken promises. But for that matter, Barak is also unprepared. He sees a deal's cost-benefit advantage to all, while Arafat's calculus may be different. Moreover, Barak's Tel Aviv-centered world as the high priest of the Israeli defense establishment has made it hard for him to fully comprehend the depth of Jerusalem's religious and nationalistic passions surrounding the Temple Mount.

Clinton's problem solving, Rabin's strategic vision, and Ben-Gurion's decisiveness have all contributed to Barak's steely resolve, but there are other forces at work as time runs out. Barak wants the past to no longer bury the future. Yet this time, the former sayeret soldier may find he is on an unsuccessful mission.

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