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# Israel from within

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Israel is a young state, and only recently has it begun to be subjected to fundamental political, economic and social analyses. Personal autobiographies have always been thick on the ground, but there have been few, if any, academic studies, using the "scientific" appurtenances available to the political and social scientist. Dr Aronson's book\* may be viewed as part of a process of soul-searching, of indicating "where things went wrong," and how Israel's future may be better secured.

Shlomo Aronson has been one of Israel's leading political analysts for many years. In 1967 and in 1973 he served as a war correspondent for the Israel Broadcasting Service. His intimate acquaintance with the Israeli Establishment and its political system has facilitated Aronson's in-depth analysis of Israel's foreign policy, as influenced and conditioned by the domestic environment. By this method, Dr Aronson has attempted to explain to the outside world "the complex reasons behind what often appears as (Israel's) aggressive and obstinate behaviour." The book is a mine of information for any student of Middle Eastern affairs since 1948, though it is not always an easy one to read. Much of Aronson's information is supposition, and much has to be accepted on credit, for with few documented sources to rely upon, the author has had extensive recourse to "leaked" information whose source cannot be divulged, or post-hoc evidence of participants with their own axe to grind.

By far the liveliest, and most revealing parts of the book are the character sketches of Israel's leaders, and the social analysis of its élite. Three main "crossroads" in Israel's development are discerned by Dr Aronson — the demise of Ben-Gurion after the "Lavon Affair" in the early 1960s; the Six-Day war in 1967; and of course the Yom Kippur War in 1973.

In Aronson's opinion, Ben-Gurion was a "postulative" statesman, but also a master at "mixing basic principles with sharp political tactics." He camouflaged a basically pragmatic policy by at the same time generating a mood of activism whereby he mobilized the national sensibilities of the people for domestic purposes. In 1948, Ben-Gurion's pragmatism led him to renounce territory in order to retain a homogeneous Jewish State, without a large Arab minority. But to the public, he explained that Israel had been kept within those borders by military weakness and extra-regional pressures. By casting the argument in those terms, he legitimized national aspirations to revised borders, so long as the conflict continued.

In 1967, he was caught up in the contradictions of his assumed foreign and



Levi Eshkol (third from the left) and David Ben-Gurion (second from right) toasting an Israeli achievement. But the two men did not remain friends.

defence policy. The unexpected results of the Six-Day War invalidated his pessimism about the ability of the Israel Defence Forces — the IDF — to hold their own against the Arabs and of Israel to hold on to conquered territory. When he said in public that Israel should return all the territories captured in 1967, in exchange for peace, thus reflecting his basic priority of not ruling large numbers of Arabs, he was dismissed as the old fallen leader, envious of Eshkol's achievements.

The Lavon Affair (the dispute over who was responsible for ordering Israeli agents to commit acts of sabotage in Egypt in 1954) which racked the Israeli establishment in the early 1960s, did irreparable damage both to Ben-Gurion himself and to his Party, Mapai. His relations with long-standing colleagues like Golda Meir were totally destroyed. The image of the Israel Labour Party was damaged beyond repair.

Eshkol, a born compromiser, could not provide the charisma that Ben-Gurion had, nor could he set clear national goals, like his predecessor. Paradoxically, where Ben-Gurion had managed to project a stronger image than was the actual case, while pursuing a policy more defensive than it appeared to be — Eshkol in 1967 achieved the exact opposite. While the IDF were in fact far superior to the Arab coalition they faced, Eshkol, engaged in secret negotiations which were mostly kept from the public, projected an image of weakness and hesitation. The result was national hysteria, fears of a new Holocaust, and the return of Dayan, in the role of Messiah.

In terms of style and the content of his policy, Dayan was almost the personification of the "new man" that Ben-Gurion and his

generation had sought to create. But he was a man of action, acting often on impulse, without the self-discipline and orderliness necessary for true greatness. His path in the Army and in politics, in the spotlight of world publicity, gained for him a reputation based on his personality, and on accomplishments that were not all his, as in 1967.

By 1967, the image of a socially, culturally and psychologically reformed sovereign state, moulded by Ben-Gurion to change the nature of a dispersed nation, had become divorced from realities in Israel. Israeli attitudes on foreign and defence policy were changed overnight in 1967, when the apparently impossible occurred. The whole of Mandatory Palestine, not to mention the Sinai and Golan Heights, were conquered with relative ease. Since Ben-Gurion had maintained the status quo only by insisting that revision was militarily impossible, aspirations to the whole of the Land of Israel remained legitimate and were suddenly capable of realisation.

At the same time, the 1967 War ushered in a period of great economic expansion, financed largely through inflationary measures and imported capital. Supervised by the new Finance Minister, Pinhas Sapir, the new prosperity deepened social differences and created a new money élite, a deficit budget and a low rate of productivity. While the Labour Party tried to retain traditional egalitarian principles, there was a general rush for better living.

Thus the new illusions of Israel's grandeur fostered by the Meir-Dayan leadership, and the deep changes within Israeli society prepared the way for the "earthquake" on Yom Kippur, 1973.

Golda Meir tried to base Israel's foreign policy on Israeli power and autonomy of decision. She regarded Israel's military strength not only as a national asset, but also as a factor of regional importance vital to the United States. Her thesis was demonstrated effectively in 1970, when Israel's partial mobilization deterred the Syrians from active intervention against King Hussein during his "Black September" war against the Palestinians of al-Fatah.

But the Yom Kippur war shattered the Israeli (and American) illusion that Israel could deter the Arabs from war, or win one

quickly without harming American interests. As a consequence of the Arabs' initial gains, and Israel's emergency needs, Israel lost its autonomy.

There were also far-reaching domestic repercussions. The legendary reputation of the Israel Defence Forces was damaged when stories leaked out of positions overrun and of promised rescue-missions that never materialized. The circumstances in which the war broke out, and the manner in which it was conducted, gave rise to national bitterness and anger at government failings. Criticism was levelled at the ruling Labour alignment, and at the economic and social system established by Sapir. An entire nation searched its soul; the pre-war complacency, the alienation from historic ideals, the corruption of pioneering values. The net result was the political alienation of large sections of the population from established networks of political affiliation. Protest movements emerged spontaneously, but proved unable to provide an alternative to any of the large power-alignments. The Israeli public eventually registered its protest by electing Menachem Begin as Prime Minister in 1977.

Dr Aronson is most perceptive in his description and analysis of Kissinger's "shuttle diplomacy," with which the latter half of the book deals. Kissinger came to the Middle East with a legendary reputation, as the Harvard professor-statesman, the man who had ended the Vietnam war (the aftermath of his settlement, the North Vietnam take-over, was still in the future). He was untainted by Watergate, and indeed, he would assume almost monopolistic control of his country's foreign affairs as President Nixon was submerged in the affair. Kissinger forced the pace with his tightly-scheduled "shuttle-trips," goaded each side with his threats to leave the Middle East and let the sides fight it out.

Kissinger fulfilled a vital, but limited function after 1973. He arranged a pull-back of forces and lowered the level of the conflict. But many criticised him for his piecemeal approach, which tackled the peripheries of the problem while leaving its nucleus to fester.

Aronson's book was completed in 1977, but not published until 1978. He has therefore been able to add a short epilogue on the Sadat initiative. While Dr Aronson is optimistic that compromise on both sides might bring some stability into Israeli-Egyptian relations during the near future, he is not at all sanguine about the fate of the area in general. Aronson believes that only a Palestinian "entity" on the West Bank might neutralise the central unstabilising factor in the area. Such a tiny entity would be dominated on either side by Israel and Jordan, he claims, and its external behaviour could affectively be controlled. Aronson's conclusion is somewhat in conflict with his earlier description of the PLO as a radical, Moscow-oriented organization, which if allowed to, might bring Soviet-Syrian-backed irredentists into the West Bank.

Politically, there have rarely been such grounds for optimism as those created by the Sadat initiative. But social and economic challenges seem currently to pose more of a threat to Israel's future than any external power.

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\*Conflict and Bargaining in the Middle East. By Shlomo Aronson. John Hopkins University Press. £13.25.