

Israel's Diplomatic Year, 5745

By Walter Eytan

Taba

this year made an unprecedented grant of \$1.5 billion on top of what was in any case the most generous measure of economic aid offered to any country. At the same time the Reagan Administration has been pushing for movement in what has come to be known as the 'peace process.'

(WZPS) — Walter Eytan, the first Director-General of Israel's Foreign Ministry (1948-1959) and Israel's Ambassador to France from 1960-1970, once again surveys Israel's diplomatic year.

Although Eytan deals only with the more prominent aspects of the diplomatic year, it should be mentioned that President Chaim Herzog's official visit to Ireland and President Mobutu Sese Seko's visit to Israel were diplomatic coups in their own right.

At the present time the subject of Soviet Jewry is going through numerous changes and developments: for the first time Soviet Jewry is being linked, both by Washington and Moscow, to the situation in the Middle East.

Lebanon

For Israel's external relations the year 5745 was dominated, as well the two previous years, by the military operation named originally "Peace for Galilee." By the time it was over this past June, everyone was referring to it frankly as the Lebanese war. It ended, as it were, unilaterally - by Israel's withdrawing its army from Lebanon.

With the final withdrawal, the Israeli public heaved a collective sign of relief. New arrangements were made on both sides of the border to ensure, as far as possible, the security of Galilee. These have yet to be fully tested, but it is hoped that this sensitive northern region will in future be more tranquil than during the years prior to Israel's military intervention in Lebanon. There is no forgetting, alas, the 650 soldiers killed since the beginning of the war.

Egypt, unfortunately, used the war in Lebanon as an additional pretext for not returning its ambassador to Tel Aviv. The other main pretext was the dispute over Taba, whose importance was blown up out of all reasonable proportion. This tiny area of a few hundred acres is adjacent to Eilat in the northeastern corner of Sinai. Israel and Egypt both claim it as part of their sovereign patrimony, each basing its case on old maps, of which some go back 80 years or more. The Israel-Egypt peace treaty provides for the settlement of disputes by conciliation or arbitration. Egypt has insisted on the latter - and the issue has resulted in a squabble between Prime Minister Shimon Peres and the Labor Party, who see no reason to reject arbitration, and Foreign Minister Yitzhak Shamir and the Likud, equal partner with Labor in the 'national Unity' government, who demand that conciliation be tried first.

The result, so far, has been stalemate, with no movement from the Israeli side, which meanwhile still holds Taba - stalemate not only on Israel's own political scene, but inevitably, in the development of relations with Egypt. There seems little prospect of the Egyptian ambassador's return to his post until arbitration procedures get under way, and perhaps not until the whole Taba question is settled.

Free Trade and Peace Negotiations

In the wider foreign field, Israel's one vital concern is for its relations with the United States. These have remained unshaken - strengthened, indeed, by the conclusion of a Free Trade Agreement, the first of its kind in recent American history. The USA in an exceptional gesture, to ease Israel's financial crisis,

This term now stands for the possibility of negotiations between Israel and a combined Jordanian-Palestinian delegation authorized to talk peace or whatever comes nearest to peace. Israel has always been willing, indeed anxious, to negotiate with Jordan: this was confirmed last year in the Labor-Likud coalition agreement. Ever since the Camp David agreements of 1978 it has accepted the need for talks with 'Palestinian representatives' as well. The problem, for Israel and the USA alike, is who these representatives are to be, since both reject the idea of negotiating with the PLO, whose only declared policy is the destruction of Israel by "armed struggle."

King Hussein of Jordan is in no position, in terms of Arab politics, to negotiate with Israel on his own. He has to have Palestinian partners - ideally, in his situation, the PLO, but at least, if the PLO itself is excluded, representatives sponsored by the PLO. No way has been found so far of squaring the circle: American and Israeli rejection of a PLO which insists that it is the Palestinians' only authentic voice and will not authorize Jordan to negotiate without it.

Meanwhile the peace process hangs fire. The USA has infused it with a certain urgency: peace between Israel and Jordan might be as rare a feather in the cap of President Reagan as peace with Egypt was in President Carter's. It is an issue on which the USA can expect solid support from its European allies, especially those among them who have long been prone to dealings with the PLO. Yet there are few illusions. This peace would be infinitely more complicated than was that with Egypt. Agreement is not yet around the corner.

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