

{AUGUST 14 2004}

# A DROUGHT IN TEXAS

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**O**nce upon a time, an assistant to Levy Eshkol, our late Prime Minister, rushed up to him and cried: “Levy, a disaster! A drought has set in!” “Where?” the Prime Minister asked anxiously, “in Texas?” “No, here in Israel!” the man replied. “Then there’s nothing to worry about,” Eshkol said dismissively. Right from the beginning, the State of Israel has been critically affected by events in the United States. “If America sneezes, Israel catches cold,” is the local version of the universal saying.

This is particularly true in the run-up to American elections. They can be as important for Israel as our own, since the occupant of the White House can influence the fate of Israel in many significant ways. But they have an additional significance: the months before the American elections are a kind of open season for Israel.

The basic assumption is that no candidate for the White House would dare to provoke the American Jewish voters at election times. They are an extremely well organized and highly motivated political bloc, ready to donate heaps of money, which gives them political clout well beyond their numbers.

Actually, there are now more Muslims than Jews in the United States, but they are not organized, their motivation is weak, their willingness to donate large amounts of money near zero. Their adherence to the Palestinian cause, for example, cannot match the fierce loyalty of most of the Jews to Israel. Moreover, in this the Jews are now joined by tens of millions of Christian evangelical fundamentalists.

Israeli governments naturally time their most controversial moves to coincide with the American elections. The more closely fought the elections, the more attractive it is for Israeli planners and adventurers.

The State of Israel unilaterally declared its independence in May 1948, when Harry Truman’s reelection campaign was in a critical condition. David Ben Gurion made the decision against the advice of some of his wisest colleagues, who warned him that the United States would oppose the move with all its might. He bet on the inability of the American system to do that during an election campaign.

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At the time, Truman was desperately in need of money. Some Jewish millionaires provided it. To show his gratitude, and against the express advice of his Secretary of State (George Marshall) and especially his Secretary of Defense (James Forrestal), Truman immediately accorded the new state de facto recognition. (Stalin trumped him and recognized Israel de jure.)

Since then, this has been a repeating pattern. The Israeli government ordered the army to attack in 1967 (starting the Six Day War) after receiving an OK from President Lyndon Johnson, who at the time was still hoping to be reelected in 1968. The critical first year after that war, when America failed to induce Israel to withdraw from the territories its army had conquered, was, of course, an election year. Most of our present troubles stem from that.

Only once did the calculation fail. In 1956 Ben Gurion colluded with France and Britain against Egypt's Gamal Abd-el-Nasser. After conquering the Sinai peninsula, Ben-Gurion declared the "Third Israeli Kingdom". He was convinced the Americans were preoccupied with their election and would not interfere. He was wrong.

President Dwight D. Eisenhower, who was standing for reelection, was assured of a landslide majority. He did not need the Jewish vote. He was also a man of principle. So he presented Ben-Gurion with what amounted to an ultimatum: evacuate the Sinai or else. Four days after setting up his "kingdom" Ben-Gurion announced its demise. But this was an exception.

Ariel Sharon, who considers himself a personal disciple of Ben-Gurion (as does Shimon Peres), is basing his present policy on the same calculation. President George W. Bush is fighting for his political life. He will not dare to provoke a quarrel with Israel at this juncture. So from now until November, Sharon can do much as he pleases.

President Bush's famous Road Map is dead. (I can hear him exclaiming: "Road Map? What Road Map? The only Map I need is of the road to the White House!") His demand for a freeze on all building activity in the settlements, "even for the natural increase", is becoming a joke. Sharon has just openly flouted this by announcing plans for 600 new houses in the Ma'aleh Adumim settlement.

Emissaries of the Security Council and the State Department (Zionist Jews, by the way) are practically begging Sharon on their knees to dismantle dozens of new settlements (referred to as outposts") put up since he assumed power in 2001. Sharon has promised this to Bush many times, in return for reversals of long-standing US policy. Sharon must be hard put not to laugh in their faces.

However, Sharon does have a vital interest in Bush's reelection. He is afraid of John Kerry, even if he says exactly the same as Bush on the Israeli-Palestinian issue, and his grandfather's name was Cohen. Experience has shown that there is no necessary

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correlation between what politicians say before elections and what they do after them. That is the other side of the election coin.

So Sharon may be induced to do something – anything at all – that will allow Bush to claim the credit for a “historical breakthrough” in the Middle East. Perhaps – who knows? – a week before the elections, three mobile homes may be dismantled on some godforsaken hilltop in Samaria. Wow!