

EIREyewitness Report

The Middle East needs many General de Gaulles

Special from Middle East Insider

The following two interviews were granted to the weekly newsletter *Middle East Insider* at the beginning of February, and have since been widely circulated all over the Middle East. On March 6, the Kuwaiti Arabic daily *As Seyassa* reprinted almost in full the text of our interview with Gen. Ezer Weizman. Both interviews speak for themselves in outlining the political debate within Israel on the question of peace with the Palestinians.

General Weizman, whose political and military record is impressive, has some very clear suggestions to make, both on how to deal with Palestine Liberation Organization chairman Yasser Arafat, as well as the kind of in-depth political reforms needed in Israel. Former Chief of Staff Mordechai Gur follows suit in the same direction. In addition, his remarks on the role of Henry Kissinger in the early 1970s may serve as a warning to those who are toying with the idea of appointing Kissinger as some kind of U.S. special emissary to the Middle East. If Washington wants to further collapse its credibility in the region, that is one sure way to do it.

Already the appointment of Kissinger's long-time associate, Lawrence Eagleburger, to the number-two job in the State Department has provoked many angry editorial comments throughout the Middle East. It will not be long before Kissinger's ambiguous role in the 1975 assassination of Saudi Arabia's King Faisal is brought up.

Neither interview claims to present a miraculous recipe for the present crisis. They outline the hopes and the limitations. Yet, a peace agreement has to be reached between Israel, the Palestinian people, and its other Arab neighbors; they have to talk to each other, and because they are stuck in the same region, they will have to work together.

The present diplomatic framework of an international peace conference has become a contentless gimmick. It is obvious that the Soviets are only interested in being afforded equal footing in the region. With no confirmed replacement for Undersecretary of State Richard Murphy, Washington is dragging its feet, not out of consideration for Israel's rejection of such a framework, but because it has other priorities. And these do not include proposals such as those raised by Mordechai Gur in the mid-1970s for making the desert blossom. Fresh investigations could be initiated as to Kissinger's real reasons for having the plan rejected by then-Defense Secretary James Schlesinger.

Israeli nationalists, like Arab nationalists, are correct in rejecting pressures coming from the superpowers, and denouncing any attempts at a condominium in the region. But all will agree that a negative posture is not enough. Ultimately the danger of war is ever-present in the region. Speaking before the Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies in Tel Aviv on Feb. 26, Israel's Chief of Staff Dan Shomron, always a cautious man, spoke of the "legitimate and moral" value of a 1967 type of preemptive strike, as he elaborated on the military threat coming from Syria, and potentially from Iraq's 55 divisions. On Feb. 23, Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze had even raised the specter of a "nuclear confrontation" in the region, warning that the "historic process" between both superpowers could "grind to a halt" due to a diplomatic stalemate in the region.

One of General Weizman's proposals is for Israel to find its own General de Gaulle. However, this need is not specific to Israel, but to the entire region. Bold initiatives and direct negotiations are the only formula that can ensure success.