

Interview: Ezer Weizman



'Israel needs leaders with enough guts to take a risk'

General Ezer Weizman founded the Israeli Air Force, was Defense Minister, and played a crucial role in the "Camp David" peace treaty with Egypt. He has held ministerial posts in numerous governments and, after serving as Minister Without Portfolio in recent years, was appointed Minister of Science and Technology following the last elections.

General Weizman in the recent period has been outspoken on the need for negotiations with the Palestine Liberation Organization and Yasser Arafat, because, as he says, he is "concerned about the immediate future," while "more optimistic about the long-range future."

His views of how the region should develop are attractive: a Middle East in which Israel would live in peace with all of its neighbors, and in which Israelis and Arabs would be able to travel to each other's countries freely. But for that to happen, a "few more crises may have to happen," and Israel may well need to "have a de Gaulle," the General said.

The following interview was conducted for Middle East Insider in Jerusalem on Feb. 13.

MEI: What do you think Israel has achieved over the last 40 years?

Weizman: First of all, whatever we have achieved, has its roots in the 50-60 years before the State. Zionism as recreating the Jewish state goes back to the end of the 19th century. My late mother, if she were alive, would be around 95 years old, and she was born here in a small village which is more than 100 years old. The whole business was started back in the 1800s by the realization that one of the ways for Jews to live—I think the only—was to have their own state to go back to, the land of their ancestors, Palestine.

As soon as we started, the realization was that the Arabs did not like the idea, to put it mildly. The wars started at the beginning of the century; we had the riots in the 1920s: 1921, 1929, and 1936. The famous General Wingate got one of his medals fighting the Arabs in Palestine.

The State came into being in 1948, fashioned first by the U.N. decision to create a Jewish state in Resolution 181; then through the fight against all of the Arab world, and our ability to withstand it. And, by the way, to remind the world: We lost 1% of our population in the war of 1948, which would be equal to Germany today losing 600,000 people in 18 months, or the U.S. losing 2.5 million people in 18 months.

They didn't lose that in either the First or Second World War.

Israel in 40 years has managed to grow in population and create an academic life where we now have seven universities, and world-reknowned research centers such as the Weizman Institute, keeping up with the accepted view of the Jewish people, that we are knowledgeable people. Einstein started his career in Germany. We created an industry which is at its beginning now, for instance, in high technology; and agriculture, which is going through a crisis now. However, if you look at it from a 40-year perspective, now you can have avocados in London or Munich, oranges, fresh tomatoes, and so forth.

We created a certain way of living, which is the *kibbutz*, which existed before the state—which also is undergoing a certain type of crisis, but is still here. Above all, we created a defense force which we are very proud of; we have achieved certain things; we made a few mistakes, too.

All in all, I do not think that the world can wake up in the morning without knowing that there is an Israel, for better or worse. We had our great days and our problematic days, we had the Six Day War and we had the 1973 War. It is amazing, and perhaps part of the achievement of Zionism, that our Air Force is considered one of the best in the world. Israeli pilots are considered extremely experienced. You take the present commander of the Air Force, whom I had the pleasure to present with his wings as a second lieutenant, and he now is the commander of the Air Force; he is probably one of the most experienced pilots. He has flown hundreds of missions, shooting down airplanes. I hope that in the future this will not be the main pride of Israel. Unfortunately, in the last 40 years, this has been the case. I do hope that we create a younger generation that is a different young Jew from the man born 40 years ago.

In the 40 years, we have achieved one important thing, peace with Egypt. You just asked me about 40 years, and look at it; for 25% of it, for 10 years, we have had peace with Egypt, which is an extremely important, almost unbelievable achievement, not appreciated by most Israelis.

What Israel has managed to achieve in 40 years, is a more common feeling that we have to come—although not at all costs, not at any price—to a peaceful coexistence with the Arab world. With all the mistakes that the Arabs made, and all the mistakes that we have made, look at what we achieved

in 1978 and 1979, since the arrival of [the late Egyptian President Anwar] Sadat [in Jerusalem]. Sadat was a great man, and his policies are being continued by his successor, President Mubarak. I didn't believe it could be like that. It is very difficult to run Egypt; it is in a very difficult situation.

When people tell me, Mubarak is going back to the Arab world, I tell them, "Where do you want him to go, to Scandinavia? He *is* the Arab world!" Peace with Egypt is the most important achievement of the past 40 years!

Unfortunately, the situation now is one of slight decline, because for the Israelis to realize that they would have to give up the Gaza Strip and part of the West Bank to achieve peace with the Palestinians, is a very difficult thing to accept. To achieve that, we need a strong leadership and certain crises.

We are approaching a situation—nearing the 50-year anniversary of statehood—where the main thing which will have to be achieved is peace with the Palestinians. And then you will ask, "What has Israel achieved in its 50 years?" In the first 40 years, she achieved peace with Egypt, and in 45 years, she achieved peace with the Palestinians. I think it is possible, I think it is necessary, and they will have to come to a conclusion that they have to sit down and talk to the PLO, and talk to Arafat. I am not the only one who is saying so. Some people are not saying it as clearly and as loudly as I. I am not afraid of the PLO. Like Stalin once said of the Pope, "How how many divisions has he got?" Anyone who throws bricks and bottles at me throws them because he has no F-16s and no tanks. I see no reason why we should not sit down and talk to the PLO, and then decide whether we can come to a solution or not.

People do not realize that Sadat arrived in November 1977, and that peace was reached in March 1979. It took 16 months. After all the great things, the President of Egypt arrives, and then there were ups and downs. Before Camp David, I went to Egypt at least 15 times, including a trip to Salzburg [Austria] to see Sadat.

For me today, the achievement for the next 10 years—preferably much sooner than that—will be to sit down with the PLO and say: "Look, we signed the peace treaty with Egypt based on U.N. Resolution 242; let us see how we can run Gaza and the West Bank. We give you our full respect; give us our security. Let's see how we can have a common economy, whether King Hussein comes into the game, and if this country can flourish and become a normal country."

The main task of Zionism is to become a normal country. Unfortunately, in the last 40 years, we have always prided ourselves too much on being an abnormal country. We are not a young country any more, and for the next generations—look at my two grandchildren here—for them to have a happier and more prosperous, normal life like youngsters in other countries, we have to sit down and talk to the PLO about coexistence.

MEI: How do you see your particular role in negotiations with the PLO?

Weizman: It could be that I will not be involved, because there is a younger generation and because the elections have elected whom they have elected. I resigned eight and a half years ago from the Defense Ministry and left the Likud because I thought that Begin regretted signing the Camp David Accord. He didn't continue. If he would have pursued what he had promised, the whole situation would be different, and I would still be in the Likud. To me a political party is a frame, a framework where one can achieve and push what one believes in.

The four main people in a game like this are the prime minister, the foreign minister, the defense minister, and the finance minister, and the four of them still don't believe what I believe. I am not going to sit all my life in a government and say, "You are wrong." It could well be that I will become very close to being fed up in talking all the time about things that I cannot do.

Mr. [Moshe] Arens, the minister of foreign affairs, voted against peace, but he is the foreign minister and i am minister of science—which proves to you that the world is topsyturvy. Mr. [Prime Minister Yitzhak] Shamir abstained from voting for peace. Mr. [Finance Minister Shimon] Peres and Mr. [Defense Minister Yitzhak] Rabin are in the opposition. I think that if they do not change their attitude, I won't have anything to do with the government. Since in the merry month of June, I will turn 65, I might say, you know, "Go break your neck somewhere else," i.e., my neck.

It is no use sitting in a government and being all the time in opposition. We will wait two months and see what happens. A lot depends also what happens in Europe, what happens in America, and what happens in Russia. America and Russia do not want a war, not because they love each other, but because of the economic problems of Russia and the economic problems of the United States. Why does Bush need an uproar in the Middle East? They are all very concerned about the East—Japan, Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, and China. The last thing they need is a blowup in the Middle East. If the U.S. and Russia do not push for a solution and our wise politicians do not change, the stalemate will not continue.

My contribution is in being controversial.

MEI: What about unilateral actions?

Weizman: What if I go to meet with the PLO? There will be headlines for a week, and what after that?

If I thought that my meeting with the PLO now, with Arafat, could contribute to something—even if by doing that I lost my political head—I would do it. For instance, I could meet to try to persuade Arafat to declare a ceasefire, which would make it more attractive for Israelis to talk with him. If I ever come to that conclusion, I will do it. But right now, probably there would be some newspaper headlines, and I would be kicked out of the government.

MEI: If you were in another position, what steps do you

think should be taken?

Weizman: I would invite Arafat for talks. I would say: "Look, you fought me and I fought you, but I think it is time to sit down and talk. You recognized Resolution 242; you recognized me; I recognize you. I am willing to meet wherever you want and I'll talk to you like I talked to Sadat."

However, there is no real comparison, because Sadat was heading a sovereign state, and the Palestinians have to create something from nothing.

But I would definitely invite him, were I prime minister. It could be that it is because of this that I am *not* prime minister.

Eventually, a prime minister will wake up one day and realize that he has to take this step. If it is Mr. Shamir, I would bless him and kiss him. I thought that Peres would make this invitation, but he didn't do that. He tried to excuse himself and explain it away. If Mr. Shamir, or Arens, or Arik, or anyone ever does it, they'll get the same support from me. I have my doubts they will, but I hope that I am wrong. If the Israeli leadership does not take a decision within the foreseeable future and does not realize that the PLO is the only entity to talk business with. . . . As with the Syrians: Not one shot has been fired in the Golan Heights for 15 years. Are the Syrians more pleasant people than the PLO? Of course not!

MEI: On the other side, Ariel Sharon was recently warning that the present diplomatic moves would lead to a new war.

Weizman: The lack of momentum will lead to war in the Middle East. My logic is different but, of course, that's because he is an infantryman and I am a pilot. The way a pilot looks at the Middle East is a bit different from the way an infantryman, for whom there is a tank behind each bush, looks at it. I think he is wrong; the lack of momentum will lead to war.

Let's assume that there is a Palestinian entity on the West Bank and Gaza, and with that a political agreement, an economic agreement, and an agreement that they have 24 APCs [armored personnel carriers], 4 helicopters, and 72 pistols. We have an agreement with Egypt on limiting forces in the Sinai. If I can have an agreement with a country like Egypt, why can't I have it with a Palestinian entity, especially if it is coordinated with Jordan, with Egypt, with America, and Russia?

MEI: How do you see the economic foundations of a Palestinian entity?

Weizman: What are the economic foundations throughout the whole world, but cooperation? I want to see a Benelux-type system here. I want to go back to the years when I was a youngster, when I used to go with my father to Beirut, Damascus, Cairo. I was never in Baghdad, but he used to go to Baghdad. Anyone who thinks that Israel can exist on its own, without communications and economic links with Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Cyprus, and so forth, is wrong. I do not

want to only sell vegetables to Bonn.

There will be a Palestinian state; they will have an agreement with Jordan, and they will have an agreement with us. Hussein will be watching on the east, we will be watching on the west, and, unless they misbehave themselves, they can live happily as well.

MEI: Do you see a reshaping of Israeli political life?

Weizman: There will be a change of the electoral system which is bound to reshape the political parties. The Likud is trying to be a center party. The Labor Party is not a socialist party. I hope that with a changed electoral system, which I am all for, whatever it is, there could be a change.

We need a leadership which will have enough guts to take a risk; like Sadat took a risk, like Begin, like de Gaulle took a risk. Part of the country will not like it; the fact is that Sadat was murdered. But if I had my way—and I have not said my last words—if I knew that some of us could do something that could be used as a detonator, I would do it.

For a man like Sadat to come to Jerusalem, facing the whole Arab world—this was a very courageous man. I lost a very good friend, and the region lost a great leader. Leadership is also judged by the way you leave things behind you, and the way Sadat had enough sense to leave Mubarak—I think it is his greatest contribution. Mubarak's style is not the same, but you can look at the way he runs Egypt.

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