

## Interview: Mordechai Gur



# 'The central issue is the Palestinian issue'

*Israeli Minister Without Portfolio Mordechai Gur is best known for his tenure as Israel's Chief of Staff from 1974 to 1978. According to Israeli media, the "Gur faction" within the Labor Party has been growing in strength in recent months, putting General Gur in a position in which he could over the next couple of years become Israel's prime minister. This indicates the importance of the role he has played in the last decades of the peace process, and his views on the Palestinian problem. This interview was conducted in his Tel Aviv office Feb. 13 by Middle East Insider.*

**MEI:** It seems to us that over the last decade or so, you have modified your views on how to approach the peace process.

**Gur:** Not so much, let's talk about it.

**MEI:** For example, at the time of Sadat's visit to Jerusalem, you launched a warning in the media on the potential threat coming from Egypt.

**Gur:** It might be a good idea if I lay out my views about our relations with the neighbors.

Let's start with 1967. Immediately after the war of 1967—in which I participated in the liberation of Jerusalem, played a very active role, and was very much emotionally involved—I knew quite well that the main idea was immediately, how to get back to peace.

Then, I was nominated as the military adviser to our Mission at the U.N., at the time headed by Abba Eban.

I come to the first point: It was my proposal that we withdraw unilaterally from the Suez Canal to 40 kilometers from the canal, to prove to the Egyptians that we did not have any intent to remain. "After the war, let's now talk peace."

My view was always first of all, that we should live in coexistence and that we can live in coexistence. The more powerful we are, the more we can make concessions. That was my idea all my life and that was the combination of my military experience and understanding, and basic political belief. You have to know that I was born in Jerusalem, and lived together with Arabs before the war of independence. My father used to work in an Arab transport company. I have

known coexistence in light and in darkness, in good days and bad days; but I know that coexistence can be achieved and done.

I suggested a unilateral withdrawal based on our power, on our force. Anyhow, that idea was not accepted very warmly by either side. The Arab reaction at the time, was: no peace, no negotiation.

When the Yom Kippur War exploded, I was in Washington as a military attaché. Toward the last phase of the war, I had, almost daily, long talks with the American secretary of defense at that time, James Schlesinger.

I tried to convince the Americans that as a result of the war—that again was not initiated by us—perhaps it is time, once the Egyptians feel a little bit better (that even if they didn't win the war, their self-confidence and pride were in better shape), to use this new situation for a much deeper and better understanding between Israel and Egypt. This could be done with the help of the United States, based on our withdrawal from Sinai, because I never thought that we should stay in Sinai.

I tried to convince the Americans that with their involvement in Sinai, we could get out. Then, with American help, we could develop Sinai as an area of Israeli-Egyptian co-production, making the Al Arish region a flourishing area for the benefit of all the citizens. Development would include irrigation and agriculture.

Unfortunately, the Americans felt that after Vietnam, they should not be involved in projects like that. I believe this was a mistake. My view was that the time was ripe for reaching deeper understanding.

**MEI:** What role did Vietnam play in the American refusal?

**Gur:** After Vietnam, the American government felt that any involvement of American forces outside their immediate sphere, would not be accepted by the American people.

Though at the time, I said to Schlesinger: Why doesn't Nixon come out with a "Nixon plan for peace," based on co-production to make the desert flourish?

After a day, they said that even if the idea were good,

they would not be able to make it acceptable to American public opinion after Vietnam, because Americans would be afraid to be stuck in another conflict.

Then I was nominated head of our military mission in Geneva to the international conference discussing the first interim agreement, or, rather, the separation of forces agreement. I did not have any doubts that we were going to withdraw from Sinai.

In Geneva, I suggested to then-Defense Minister Moshe Dayan that the withdrawal should be much bigger: once we realize that we are facing a new era of peace instead of fighting, let's do it big, and directly with the Egyptians; not via Kissinger and the Americans. Whatever we decide to give up, let's do it directly with the Egyptians. Why should we need the good services of the United States, if they are not participating in developing the area?

However, most people in Israel felt that the good services of the Americans were really necessary, and I emphasize that because it is also true today. Direct concessions, direct talks seemed very complicated and difficult.

For example, from Washington I had suggested that the first meetings should take place between Israeli and Egyptian officers, because, as it has been shown in history many times, meetings of officers, where we meet on equal professional grounds, establish good will for further meetings by politicians.

Kissinger rejected it as impossible—and so did Moshe Dayan.

However, the Egyptians accepted it, and the meeting at 101 [101 kilometers from the Suez Canal] was the first real talk about future political discussions that we had. This was the third time that, in view of our withdrawal from Sinai, I had actively recommended direct talks between us and the Egyptians.

The agreement on separation of forces was agreed upon in early 1974. In April 1974, I immediately began my turn as Israel's Chief of Staff with negotiations with the Syrians. I then suggested some territorial concessions to the Syrians, even inside our previous lines. In the event, Kissinger negotiated between the two sides. I realized that even after the Yom Kippur War, we were strong enough to be able to participate in an agreement that would include concessions, that not only would not weaken our positions, but would strengthen them for a long time. We have had that agreement now for 15 years.

In 1975, when we started discussing the interim agreement with Egypt, I suggested that instead of what was considered a small agreement for a local withdrawal, we should immediately withdraw to the Al Arish Line. The idea was again that we should directly negotiate with the Egyptians, and that if we have the feeling that we are moving toward peace, we should do it big! Let's not waste our money in the Sinai anymore. I want all my bases in the Negev in Israel, and then we see how we can get to the final phase of the real

and complete peace.

I received permission from Shimon Peres, who was Defense Minister, and Yitzhak Rabin, who was Prime Minister, to present that plan to the government. My proposal was rejected.

Not only was I not against steps toward peace, but I had a very clear idea about how to move toward it. I believed then and I believe now, that "doing it big" is the only way to overcome difficulties in conflicts that are as deep and emotional as our conflict with the Arabs, and especially with the Palestinians. But it was the same with the Arabs.

Kissinger said then in 1975 that even Sadat did not want such a deep withdrawal—I doubt whether it was true or not—because he knew, he would have to pay something, he was not yet prepared to pay. I do not know whether it is true or not, because I did not talk to Sadat at the time, but I know what my position was. Prime Minister Rabin had asked me: If you suggest something like that, what do you expect to get in return? My answer was: the process to peace! We are not in a grocery store. It is not that if I give something, I immediately have to get something back. I believe that the process is worthwhile. For military purposes, it is good that we have a large area between us. For economic reasons, it is good that we stop wasting our money in Sinai, because it will not be ours anyhow. And politically, we have to show the Egyptians that we are ready to do it big.

**MEI:** Why was it rejected by the government?

**Gur:** Because they thought that Sadat could not compensate us with the same kind of political concessions that we expected him to make.

**MEI:** Basically the line of Kissinger was accepted?

**Gur:** If you remember, Kissinger's policy was step-by-step. I believed in step-by-step policy, but I thought that these steps should be much bigger and decisive. He said that Sadat was not ready for it. Our government thought that the Egyptians would not be ready to compensate us politically for such a big step. I said that as far as I was concerned, the separation of forces on one hand, and the big gesture on the other hand—this is the real compensation, because we move safely into peace.

We signed that agreement in 1975. The plan was that in October 1978, that agreement would expire and that we should sign another one, and we prepared for it. Then there was a change in the government and Begin became prime minister. He changed the directives to us, the General Staff. He said that the ultimate border of Israel in the Sinai should be a line between Al Arish and Ras Mohammed; not security borders, but formal international borders—which I knew, would never be accepted by the Egyptians. We had a discussion about it. I said it will not work.

Then, on Sept. 6, 1977, I was summoned by Begin. He and Yigal Yadin (then deputy prime minister) were worried

that the Egyptians were preparing an attack on Israel. I was there together with my Chief of Intelligence, General Gazit, and we argued that there is no reason for war, there is no place for war. We said that the Egyptians are only preparing themselves for the next phase of the new agreement to take place next October. Begin was a little bit doubtful.

Then came the initiative of President Sadat, based on his fear that if we go to an international conference, there will be an explosion. He had met with [Romanian President] Ceausescu, discussing whether Begin really wanted peace or not, and he decided to take the initiative.

My fear was not about the Egyptians. While visiting Syria and Saudi Arabia, Sadat had said explicitly that, militarily, the Arab world will not be able to beat Israel, for at least five years. I took it as very good, hard intelligence. He said now, let's begin a big peace initiative concerning the return of all our lands, and put Israel to test. If Israel is willing to do it, then we get back our territories, and we have peace. If Israel does not agree, then everybody will know who is against peace. And then, in some time, that will create the possibility of war.

I must say that the only one who surprised me was Begin. That was my mistake, because I could not imagine that he was willing to give back the whole of Sinai. My intelligence about the Arabs was very good. My intelligence about my political superior was wrong. What I was afraid of, was that, with Sadat coming to Jerusalem, making such an important international gesture, unless we responded in a similar way, this would create the path to war. If you read Sadat's autobiography, he writes explicitly, at least 20 times, that if he had not received what he had expected, he would have gone to war.

I told Mr. Begin: If you get Sadat here, without knowing exactly what we are going to do, it might create clouds of war. If he does not get what he expects, everybody will be against us.

Unfortunately, on that issue Begin did not call any discussion with the government, or even in smaller groups. The only way I could express my views, was to make them public. I endangered my position, because he could ask me to resign any minute, and I was ready.

I said to Mr. Begin, you know that I do not agree with your policy; I believe that you are going to give back all of Sinai before solving the Palestinian issue. And without a solution to the Palestinian issue, there will not be a stable peace for a long time.

That was a discussion among two schools of thought in Israel. One—which included Golda Meir, Moshe Dayan, and Menachem Begin—believed that the Palestinian issue practically does not exist, and that it is an artificial issue created by the Arab countries. Once we have peace with Egypt, other Arab countries will follow, and the Palestinian issue will fade away.

I belong to another school which believes that the Pales-

tinian issue is the central issue, and as long as this is not solved, no peace will be stable. I said to Begin, if you give up all of Sinai when we still have clouds in the east, that's not the right policy. But as Chief of Staff I can tell you, you do not have any military problem. We can give you backing for any policy you decide, because since 1974, we have built a new and very effective military organization that can give you backing for any political plan you want.

As for the Palestinian issue that we are facing now, I believe that the change in the PLO is real. It is not complete, but it's real. We are strong enough to welcome that change and start political negotiations. Some of my colleagues think it is a disaster. I do not see it as a disaster because I know we have to solve our coexistence with the Palestinians, and it is better to solve it on political grounds rather than military. I believe we are strong enough to face it. I believe we are strong enough to make concessions that can ease the way to the solution. It will not be easy. For example, today, I believe that the PLO leaders are up in the clouds, because they do not realize what real politics are.

**MEI:** How do you see the negotiations?

**Gur:** Let's just repeat some basic facts. I am against a Palestinian state and I believe that a triangle of Jordan, Palestinians, and Israel is the best solution for long-term coexistence. Now, I believe that Israel is strong enough to make concessions to that kind of option.

First, we are strong militarily; secondly, if we can keep some security areas in the territories, to be safe against any invasion from the east, we can afford it. And to do that, we do not need to be all over Judea and Samaria.

I also believe that for security and other reasons, it is not to our benefit if we have to include another 1.5 million Palestinians in the State of Israel. It is crazy. It is better if they have their own statehood and own political identity, as long as it does not endanger my existence.

I mentioned before that the PLO is in the clouds. I only arrived in the last two weeks at the realization, to what extent they are now unrealistic. I was in Paris and London—we are preparing a Jewish conference in March—and last week I had talks with four Palestinian leaders from the Territories here, who are close both to the Jordanians and the PLO. I got the first direct impression of the current euphoria of PLO leadership.

If I can sum it up in my words, they feel that they have done enough and that now the world will pressure Israel, and that's it. They have done their share and now that the world recognizes the PLO, the world will do the job. I heard that in Paris, London, and from these Palestinians. Some of them were in meetings of PLO people in many different places and they said, it is unbelievable to what extent the PLO believes that the world is going to do the job for them. In Tunisia, when they sit down, they discuss who is going to which embassy. For the PLO, the most preferred embassy is Cairo.

Two days ago, I discussed the issue with two prominent Palestinians and they said that it is also the feeling in Jordan that the PLO is high in the sky, and that they have to get down before any serious discussion can start.

I can tell you, despite all of my positive attitude, that they can forget about it, and they might lose a lot. I do not know whether you have followed the declarations by the various leaders of the PLO. I believe that one of the most important was from Abu Iyad last October. He said that the Intifada [West Bank revolt that began December 1967] cannot continue and succeed only by violence and military means. If it continues only by these means, it will fail. It has to be continued by a political process; otherwise the Intifada might fail in a way that will be considered a national Palestinian disaster, like 1948 and 1967.

He knows what he is talking about. What happened to them, is that the positive reaction of the world to Arafat's declarations, suddenly brought them to the belief that everybody is going to do the job for them, and that they do not have to make compromises and promote understanding, and sit down to very serious negotiations.

The Intifada will not succeed, and it might become another Palestinian disaster, if the PLO leadership does not grasp the reality of the geopolitical life in the region. Because even people like me, who were always ready for compromises, concessions, understanding, and so forth—I will not support anybody who is trying to put pressures on me through people who do not live here. Until now the West didn't pressure Israel beyond a certain point, and I do not believe they are going to.

**MEI:** What do you expect from the United States?

**Gur:** First, I supported what they did in these talks to the PLO.

In my view, the best option is a triangle among Israel, Jordan, and the Territories. An additional, independent Palestinian state, in such a small area, would obviously satisfy the national ambitions of the Palestinians for sovereignty and independence. On the other hand, it is going to create many complications, because this is a small area, with so many expectations and hopes. The region could soon become a center of agitation; even if the Palestinian leadership does not want that. I do not need to tell you that we have seen all over the world, many things that have gone out of control.

Everything being considered, a confederation will be much better. I know that the Palestinians are not happy with it; I know that we are not happy with a Palestinian state. But I know that a practical solution, even by stages, has to be found. For that, people have to sit down and discuss.

**MEI:** Do you foresee a situation where there could be direct negotiations between Israel and the PLO, without an international conference?

**Gur:** First of all, there will not be any international confer-

ence. I will not go there, so there won't be. It is an illusion. Why will I not go? Because there immediately will be an explosion. I was in Geneva. The first question by the Egyptians was, "Where is your withdrawal map?" At that time, Moshe Dayan was in Washington talking with Kissinger. Kissinger called Sadat, and talked to him secretly. In the international conference, nothing was achieved. With the Palestinians it is ten times more complicated. We will not go to an international conference.

We need an old European type of negotiation, where you examine carefully the positions and try to define what are the positions, and the fallback positions, etc. You can do that only in discreet talks when you can trust the negotiators. In any direct talks, if you take me—and I am considered a moderate among the Israelis—and if you take a Palestinian moderate, the gap is still huge. That can be cleared up only in discreet talks, and only maybe by stages.

Look, Yasser Arafat renounced terror. Yet, two days ago, he gave an order or instruction—I do not know what—to the people here to start using weapons. He is crazy. And then a week ago, they supported that unit which tried to infiltrate Israel from Lebanon and they said it was aimed against a military target. The next sentence, they say that settlements are military targets. I was sitting with a Palestinian and asked him about Arafat's declaration that anyone who is for elections, will get 10 bullets in the chest from him personally. We are talking open democracy, we are talking open discussions—and he will shoot anybody who will contradict him, and he will give orders to his people to use arms. I think that he is committing great mistakes. They are in a state of euphoria, that he has crossed the Rubicon.

Believe me, people make mistakes in their lives, and Arafat now has committed in the last two weeks three big mistakes: one to shoot Elias Freijj [the mayor of Bethlehem]; with 10 bullets in the chest personally, secondly to support the new infiltration from Lebanon, and thirdly to give an order to use arms against us. He is crazy. This is why it has to be dealt with, with a very careful attitude, to check what does it mean? Why did it happen? Maybe he has domestic problems.

In conclusion: On the ninth day of the Intifada, I said in the Knesset that it is going to be the most dramatic event since the birth of the State [of Israel]. It is a direct confrontation between us and the Palestinians.

We are in a real dramatic change. As the conflict is so deep and emotional between us and the Palestinians, both sides are required to show steadiness and openness, and a realistic approach. That can only be achieved, not by a slow, but by a reasonable process. The United States, the Europeans can be a lot of help. Also Egypt, which is the leading Arab country. I do not like to use words such as "positive" or "negative," but I have to say that, judging from history, we are in a positive way—though obviously we have to expect ups and downs.