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INTERVIEW WITH ABBA EBAN, 11 MARCH 1976

Avi Shlaim

INTRODUCTION

Abba Eban was often referred to as the voice of Israel. He was one of Israel's most brilliant, eloquent, and skillful representatives abroad in the struggle for independence and in the first 25 years of statehood. He was less effective in the rough and tumble of Israeli domestic politics because he lacked the common touch and, more importantly, because he lacked a power base of his own. Nevertheless, he played a major role in the formulation and conduct of Israel's foreign policy during a crucial period in the country's history.

Born in South Africa, on 2 February 1915, Eban grew up in London and gained a degree in Oriental languages from Cambridge University. During the Second World War he served with British military intelligence in Cairo and Jerusalem and reached the rank of major. After the war he joined the political department of the Jewish Agency. In 1949 he became head of the Israeli delegation to the United Nations. The following year he was appointed ambassador to the United States and he continued to serve in both posts until 1959.

On his return to Israel, Eban was elected to the Knesset on the Mapai list and kept his seat until 1988. He joined the government in 1960 as minister without portfolio and later became minister of education and culture. Three years later he was promoted to the post of deputy by Prime Minister Levi Eshkol. In 1966 Eban became foreign minister and he retained this post after Golda Meir succeeded Levi Eshkol in 1969. But when Itzhak Rabin became prime minister in 1974, Eban's ministerial career came to an abrupt end. He remained active in public life as the chairman of Knesset committee on foreign affairs and defense, and as a writer and lecturer. He died in Herzliya on 17 November 2002, aged 87.

My interview with Abba Eban took place in the Dorchester Hotel in London on 11 March 1976. I was a young lecturer in Politics at the University of Reading at the time and this was my first interview, so I was inexperienced and quite nervous. The interview was

intended for a book I had started researching on Israeli foreign policy, 1967-1973, from the Six-Day War to the October War. This book was not completed and I only made very slight use of this interview in my other writings. The death of Abba Eban prompted me to publish the text of the interview in its entirety for the light it sheds on an eventful period in Israel's foreign policy.

INTERVIEW

Q. If we define Ben-Gurionism as a search for reconciliation through the application of force, and Sharettism as a search for reconciliation through the quest for moderate solutions, would you see yourself consciously as a follower of the Sharett line and an opponent of the Ben-Gurionist line?

A. No, well first of all, I don't accept the definitions, because Sharett was a very great believer in the necessity for strength as the foundation of our diplomacy. It was he who laid emphasis on the establishment of the Brigade Group and on the fortified army. On the other hand, Ben-Gurion's rhetoric of contempt for world opinion did not reflect his real view. He had an almost reverent belief in the necessity for Israel to have a strong position in the eyes of the world, and especially in the United States. In other words, I believe that the difference in their political orientations was trivial to the point of being microscopic; the differences between them were subsidiary, individual, and temperamental, but it may surprise you when I say that I don't think that any critical scholarship could find any evidence of different philosophies of international relations between them.

And I myself am somewhat intermediate between them. I very much followed Sharett's international line, but I found him excessive in his deference to what he called world opinion, or rather static and unwilling to accept that opinion could be changed. He didn't believe that we could gain entry into the United Nations in 1949, and he left me to run that unaided. So I would say the distance between them is very small and I would be in the middle, somewhere nearer to Ben-Gurion than to Sharett.

Q. Is there a fundamental similarity between the struggle between the activists and the non-activists in the period preceding the Suez War and the debate that went on in the Israeli government after 1967, or were the issues different?

A. The discussion before '56 was on the question of methodology by which the military establishment believed it could get a tranquil frontier by a very punitive approach of launching reprisals against the neighboring states. This was the view especially when General Dayan became influential in the High Command. Ben-Gurion tended to yield to this. Even Sharett, when he became Prime Minister, very rarely withheld his approval of an act of reprisal. Both Sharett and I reached the conclusion that this was becoming sterile; not that it lacked justification, but that it did not achieve results on the ground commensurate with the political disadvantages that we suffered throughout the world. In fact, Dayan and Ben-Gurion also felt that these sporadic reprisals were becoming useless and that is what drove them toward the idea of a more massive attempt to inflict a defeat on the Egyptian army.

In the middle of it, there was the Lavon episode, in which he unexpectedly became much more extreme in his support of punitive action than any of his predecessors — perhaps than any of his successors. The historian, of course, would have to analyze what the result would have been if Israel had not undertaken these reprisals, and he might reach the conclusion that the whole of Israeli life would have been completely disrupted, so that, even if the reprisals did not achieve their total result, they probably achieved more than the absence of reprisal would have done.

Q. After 1967, did you stand for a fundamentally different policy than the official government policy, or were the differences simply those of emphasis?

A. Well, after 1967, the official policy was always a policy of territorial compromise. The official formulations were much closer to the dove-ish line than to the hawkish line. What happened was, however, that the moderate formulations of official policy ceased to be credible, because the voices that carried loudest — especially Mr. Dayan's voice

— paid not the slightest attention to the official formulation of policy. That is the paradox; the period begins after '67 with the feeling that a great revolution had taken place through the war, that we ought to be able to change our history. It could be changed in one of two ways — by changing the map, or by changing the relationships between the Israeli and Arab states. The first impulse was to change the relationships, and that is why, in June and July, we made far-reaching proposals to Syria and Egypt in which we were extremely exigent about peace, but extremely moderate on the territorial issue. In fact, for full peace, there would have been a full — almost a full — territorial restitution. These proposals were made through the United States in June 1967.

At the same time, we found ways of communicating to Jordan that, in return for a peace treaty, they could get not all the territories back, but most of them back. So I would say that the first impulse of the Israeli government, especially of Eshkol and myself, was not to see how we could change the map, but how we could change the basic system of relations in the area. In the autumn of '67, two or three events caused a change: first of all the Khartoum conference, with its contentious rejection of peace — not only of compromise, but of the very idea of peace; second, the enormous speed with which the Soviet Union rehabilitated the armies of Egypt and Syria; and third, the rise within the Israeli domestic scene of the Land of Israel movement, which, although small in numbers, had a very rhapsodic and intense effect on events and which introduced the idea that, at least with regards to the West Bank, the territorial issue was independent of security — though once you separate territory from security, then the initial philosophy of Eshkol and myself was of course disrupted. There were people who said that, whether or not it would be secure to have a peace with Jordan, there were things that are higher than security, that are higher than peace, and they made reference to metaphysical and metapolitical ideas.

All these three came together so that, by the time the end of 1968 was reached, the belief in Israel in the possibility of peace was much less and the concept of compromise was developed — namely, maintaining the full territorial status quo as an incentive to the Arabs to change their attitude on peace. No withdrawal without peace. Some of us

also understood the corollary, no peace without withdrawal. The Security Council resolution Number 242 in general supported the Arabs on territory and supported Israel on peace. In fact, this has been the international attitude for most of the time. On the territorial issue, all that we got was a certain degree of flexibility in that there was no cause for withdrawal from all the territories, and there was an American statement that the resolution neither precluded nor required a return to the '67 boundaries. On the issue of peace, however, 242 was extremely emphatic in what it demanded of the Arabs, so that, throughout '68, there was a balanced position.

In '69, I think the death of Eshkol had the effect of strengthening Dayan's position in the Cabinet. He could rely much more uncritically than before on majority support. Also the growth of a euphoric atmosphere took place in which the majority really lost its power. There was one minister who said to me that a cabinet majority that does not include Dayan is not a majority at all, and, what with the worshipful attitude of the press, we find that his ideas gained ground and he became increasingly skeptical of any possibility of peace, at least in the central sector. To some extent, he was willing for withdrawals in the Golan and near the Suez Canal, but only for the purpose of consolidation in a unitary Israel west of the Jordan.

By 1973, the result of the deadlock, and the failure of the Jarring Mission, the strong support given by the Nixon/Kissinger administration to an attritional policy, all created a climate of exuberant self-confidence that began to border on fantasy.¹ In February 1973, I made a speech at Haifa University on what I called the national style. I suggested that there had been a complete departure from a central balanced atmosphere and that there was an obsession with the physical frontiers of the country without regard to its political or moral frontiers. The rhetoric of 1973 is almost inconceivable, with Ariel Sharon saying that we could capture everything from Tunis and Iran between Turkey and the Sudan; Dayan saying that, for the next ten years, the issue was not peace, but to draw a new map, because, in the next ten years, there would be neither peace nor war; Itzhak Rabin's statement in 1973 that Golda had better boundaries than King David and King Solomon had had and that they did not require any mobilization

of reserves. So that it is really how opinion passed from sobriety to self-confidence, and from self-confidence to fantasy, reaching a somewhat absurd level in 1973, when you should compare the enormous rhetorical self-confidence with the lack of military preparation. So there is no such thing as an Israeli policy between 1967 and 1973. I think any generalization would be unscholarly and that one has to follow very sharp fluctuations.

Q. If you had been free from all these domestic political constraint, what in essence would have been your policy toward the Arabs?

A. Well, there is really no such thing as foreign policy free of domestic constraints, and foreign policy that does not take domestic politics into account is frivolous. Here I support the view that Professor Kissinger takes in his book on Castlereagh and Metternich, *A World Restored*. The essence is to find a balance between international necessity and domestic consensus. If you ask in what sense the domestic consensus inhibits our policy, I would say this — it was too ready to accept the negative answers in '67 as final. It did not allow us to publicly promulgate the idea of a compromise west of the Jordan. The exchanges with Jordan had to be made in a somewhat subterranean way without commitment. If these considerations had not come into play, I still do not think we would have gotten peace. I reject the idea that peace was available between 1967 and 1973. I think we would have gained a by-product of a better image in the non-Arab world. I think that is a very important point to make. There is nothing that Israel could have done between '67 and '73 that would have brought about peace, because the result of the '67 War did not constitute a viable basis for peace. It created a sense of humiliation on the Arab side, which made them almost incapable of negotiating. Our victory was too complete to make a central negotiation feasible.

If I had been free from constraints, we would have avoided the rhetoric of arrogance; we would have been more constant in making peace proposals, even with a tactical aim in view; we would have been a little less strictly pragmatic. Some people said, what is the use of making proposals that you know the Arabs will not accept? Whereas my

orientation would have been, not to ask whether the Arabs would accept something, but whether the enunciation of something would help Israel outside the Arab world. Once you make the Arab response the criterion for formulating Israeli political attitudes, you are really reduced to hopelessness and to sterility. I thought we should not give them the honor of deciding what our policies toward them should be. We should have been looking at the non-Arab world, and not the Arab world itself. Also, we could have played the Jarring Mission in a much more prolonged way, even if it was degenerating into a tactical exercise. Some of my colleagues did not understand that even a tactical exercise fills a vacuum.

Even diplomatic activity that is not leading anywhere is better than no diplomatic activity at all. Activity itself gives Arab moderates an alibi for avoiding the military option. It is significant that Sadat's decision to make war only came when he despaired of any diplomatic activity. By the early summer of '73, the Jarring Mission was paralyzed, the four powers had ceased to meet, and then the final blow in June — when the Nixon/Brezhnev communiqué really dismissed the Middle East with a few ritual comments, indicating that the two powers also did not really intend to do anything about the Middle East, together with Nixon's statement that not a single Israeli soldier should move from the cease-fire lines except in a framework of a contractual peace settlement. All of this led to the situation in Cairo in which there was no diplomatic activity to which anyone could refer if he wanted to avoid the military option.

- Q. What was the image of the Arabs that informed Israel's foreign policy? Mrs. Meir's image was that of a monolithic and implacable enemy. Was this your image of the Arabs?
- A. You will get a picture of my feeling if you read my speech of February 1973 at Haifa. I think it was published in full in the *Jerusalem Post* sometime in March, and in *Yedi'ot Aharanot* before that. No, I agree with that distinction. For Mrs. Meir, there was something called "the Arabs" — the adversary, the foe, the architect of our destruction. I felt the position was much more variegated; that there were currents in the Arab world;

that, together with those who still hoped to change the Middle Eastern map, there was developing a mood of reluctant fatalism. I wouldn't call it moderation. I met Arabs who felt that, although Israel was an unfortunate historical reality, it was a historic reality nonetheless; it was not going to be changed. Some elements of this attitude could be found here and there in the press and in writing. Some elements came out even in official statements, such as those of Nasser, who postponed the destruction of Israel to some eschatological date in the future about the Crusades. Whenever an Arab mentioned the Crusades, I took heart. It meant that, for the next hundred years, they thought that we would have to exist, and I thought that, by then, we could let the future look after itself. Once they transferred the image of destroying Israel from the realm of political reality to the realm of messianic hope, I thought there was a way open for accommodation.

So there were varying attitudes in the Cabinet in appraising the Arab response, with Mrs. Meir believing that it was hopeless, even though it might be necessary to make tactical movements some times. Others of us believed that the effect of four, five, six years of not changing the situation by force would bring some Arabs around to the idea that they might get most of their territory back by peace.

- Q. What was your conception of the UN and its role in bringing about the settlement of the Arab-Israeli dispute after 1967?
- A. Israel had many successes in the UN in 1967. We defeated a series of Arab proposals and Soviet proposals for full withdrawal without peace. The story is very well told in Arthur Lall's book, *The UN and the Middle Eastern Crisis*, and I think 242 on the whole was a favorable expression for Israel, considering the Arab weight and the Soviet weight in the United Nations. But that was a moment of grace. After that, it seemed obvious that we would have to go outside the UN framework for any purposeful diplomacy: first of all, because that became apparent in all the conflicts; and second, because the UN was deadlocked by the Arab preponderance and unable to adopt a balanced attitude.

The Soviets vetoed anything the Arabs didn't like, and the Arabs and Communists together had a veto power in the General Assembly. Jarring was an ineffectual representative of the United Nations. In the personal sense, he missed many opportunities, especially in 1971, when he diagnosed as a rejection of his proposals answers that were not really so very far apart. I refer to February 1971.²

But on the whole, it was obvious that the United Nations really didn't possess a mediatory capacity because Israel didn't trust its impartiality, and the UN could not help the parties. A great power can compensate the parties for what they cannot get from each other. The UN had no such possibilities. The United States also ceased to have trust in Jarring, largely because of his closeness to Soviet positions; even his physical proximity to the makers of Soviet policy. It was felt that he did not have sufficient regard for Western interests. Thus, I felt that there was more to be gained by recourse to the major powers than to the United Nations agencies.

- Q. Let's move on to the agencies involved in the making of Israeli foreign policy, starting with the Foreign Office. Why was the influence of the Foreign Office so limited in the making of national policy?
- A. I don't think that it was. The fact that something is written in the press all the time doesn't make it true. The Foreign Office was predominant in making the official policy, but the Defense Ministry took no notice of official policy or of Cabinet consensus, or of the formulas that were adopted. In general, I would say that the formulations of Israeli policy were almost ninety percent Foreign Office-oriented — the concept of territorial compromise, territorial concession, in return for peace; acceptance of 242; acceptance of withdrawal. There is one statement made by a Rafi³ spokesman saying that the Foreign Office exercised the dictatorship, and I personally exercised dictatorship over foreign policy, and he proved that everything that we asked for — the acceptance of the word "withdrawal," the acceptance of 242, the acceptance of the Jarring Mission — these were all secured. But I think that, in the formulation and adoption of official policies, the Foreign Office was almost unchallenged.

The paradox was that, in the Cabinet itself, its policies were not regarded as having any weight for some Cabinet Ministers — especially for the one voice that reverberated throughout the world. So you could win a ninety-nine percent victory in the Cabinet, but it would not affect the defense policy or the way in which Dayan articulated those policies.

Q. Would you accept the criticism that the Foreign Office was more concerned with diplomatic techniques than with the formulation of an overall strategy?

A. It had zero interest in diplomatic techniques. I don't remember any party showing the slightest interest in diplomatic technique at all. It was concerned with the formulation and defense of our policy, but once the formulation stage was reached, of course, it was up to the Cabinet and the Prime Minister to carry out the formulation of the policy. But apart from any occasional visit to the United States, nobody else dealt with foreign policy at all, and the problem didn't arise at formulation — it arose in implementation. There was really a breakdown of the supremacy of the Cabinet consensus.

Q. What was the role of the research department in the Foreign Office? I gather that it did very good work, and that its papers were of high quality, but that it was weak in the field of presentation to the Government. Was this the case?

A. Not in presentation to the Government, but, if the Government means the Cabinet, I would say that the Cabinet didn't read any papers at all — not those that came from *Aman* [Military Intelligence] or from the Foreign Office. There was a very intuitive response to events. I think the Foreign Office papers were good — some of the military intelligence papers were good. There was no real difference between the two groups on that level, except that, toward 1973, military intelligence developed the idea that the Arabs had despaired of making war because they were impressed by our strength and that, if only we held our nerve, we could hold on. The Foreign Office papers tended to draw more attention to the nuances of the variations happening within the Arab world. The Foreign Office papers relied a great deal upon opinion and the press in the Arab

world. Military intelligence was more concerned with official, and especially military, statements by Arab leaders; but, although the Cabinet was served up with this material — for it was available — there is not much evidence of it having had much effect.

- Q. I asked the army spokesman why *Aman* had gained the lead over the Foreign Office in presenting evaluations to the Government, and his reply was that, after 1967, events began to move fast in the Middle East, particularly with super-power intervention, and that the Foreign Office simply did not keep up with the pace of events. Is this an explanation you would accept?
- A. No. It goes deeper than that. The fact is that, in relation to enemy countries, the Foreign Office had no direct responsibility at all. In other words, *Aman* and the *Mossad* were formally responsible for those spheres. They had enormous machines, tremendous budgets, and vast numbers of people. The Foreign Ministry did not have any constitutional responsibility for discussing matters that depended on clandestine information, and the work of our research department was, in a sense, voluntary self-assertion. It was not even solicited. It was not asked for. The division of responsibility was the Foreign Ministry for countries with whom we had relations — the hundred countries with whom we had diplomatic relations. Arab affairs, affairs in countries with which we had no relations, were a matter for intelligence-gathering, and therefore fell under *Aman* and the *Mossad*. But there was no equality of resources, and once, when it was considered whether we should increase the effort of the Foreign Ministry Research Division, the answer was, immediately “no” — that the military intelligence had done very well in '67, which, incidentally, is not true. There was an intelligence failure before the '67 war as well — it was concealed by the military success. But on the 1st of May, the messages on my desk were that there would be no war for the next five years. The real point is that, what interested us about the Arab world — what interested Israel — was war or peace, and it was here, of course, that military intelligence had resources for evaluation. Also it was felt that, while their military movements were significant, because of their totalitarian nature, nothing much was to be gained from analyzing their

newspapers and writings, which all said the same thing.

Q. My impression is that all the planning efforts in the Foreign Ministry tended to fizzle out. What was your own attitude toward planning?

A. Well, I don't know what the word means, but I don't think planning has very much place in a Foreign Ministry at all, because you can only plan that over which you have control. You can plan your educational policy. You know your budgets; you know your resources. Planning indicates a degree of sovereignty. In fact, I don't know of any foreign office in which the planning department has amounted to very much. I discussed this with the US State Department planners. How can you plan policy for Uganda? Can you plan for Idi Amin? There has to be a much closer relationship to the improvisation and surprise of events than in any other ministry, where you have some control of what will happen in the next two or three years. All that a planning department in a foreign ministry can do is to analyze the various possibilities of evolution, but this also has very relative weight, because it is subjective, conjectural, and, above all, cannot be controlled. It is much less rewarding than meteorology, where you have certain data, but exactly what the word means in international affairs has never been elucidated.

Q. I have heard it said that, in the policy discussions with the senior officials of the Foreign Office you tended not so much to draw ideas out of them, but to use them as sounding boards for your own ideas. Is this a fair comment?

A. It may be their impression. I don't think it is a fair comment. I may not have felt that they added very much. The fact is that I had more experience than most of them had, which is not usual between ministers and civil servants. Usually civil servants have had a longer tenure than the minister, who is a guest who passes in the night. But there were some (I don't want to mention names) who certainly had a very strong effect on my own presentations to the Cabinet.

Q. A related point is that you relied rather heavily on the Director General, Gideon Rafael,

and didn't pay as much attention as you might have done to the other advisors.

- A. Well, I think he had special skills and perceptions over the other advisors, also special industry, but anyone who wrote or said something of interest would certainly have had it well-received. Mordechai Gazit had quite a strong influence, although his doveishness tended to be so militantly excessive that it was very hard to get the Cabinet to look at it with favor. Some of the ambassadors had very great weight, of course — Washington, the United Nations, especially — but I think that depended on their subjective views. Obviously the Director General had stronger and closer access, and perhaps he did cut off the others by creating greater difficulties for them than for himself to reach my ears. One weakness in the Israeli Civil Service is the refusal to write — a feeling that, unless you see the Minister, you cannot communicate with him; and this has also been a weakness in the Foreign Ministry. A refusal to understand that diplomacy is the art of letters by the very meaning of the word. I attach more importance to the written word because, when you write something, you tend to criticize yourself as you go along and to discard a great amount of untidy thought. There is not a tradition of good memoranda formulation in the Foreign Ministry.

- Q. How did you react to persistent efforts to encroach on your own territory and to infringe the prerogatives of the Foreign Ministry by people like Moshe Dayan?

- A. First of all, I don't think there was much encroachment. I think that you can't deny that foreign policy is not a specialized departmental affair. I think it is absurd to regard it in that light. In the situation of war and peace, the prime minister and the defense minister must be concerned with international relations. I wouldn't have objected at all to this activity if it were within the same consensus. The jurisdictional problems that afflicted many of my officials seemed to me to be very trivial indeed. I have no interest in them at all. I don't believe we should have departmental patriotisms. My objection is not that Dayan spoke to people, but that he didn't say the right things. If he had said the right things, I would have done everything to make him more active. It was not, therefore, a jurisdictional problem of other people dealing with foreign policy. It is the fact that they

were not dealing with it in a consonant or harmonious way, creating dissidence in which his views would have no relationship whatever to the Cabinet consensus, which we very carefully formulated.

Again, the Cabinet consensus was dominated by the Foreign Office formulations. What is the use of them when the Cabinet consensus itself was transcended or violated by Dayan, even sometimes by Israel Galili, or when a different emphasis was given to them than that which was inherent in their texts? So here we had moderate formulations of policies and extremely militant misinterpretations of them. During Eshkol's tenure, he used to be capable of repudiating some of Dayan's words. Later on, Mrs. Meir would sometimes say that what Dayan had uttered had not been cleared with her. She said that many times. She would say that she had objected to the religious party's policy for annexing the West Bank. He would go off and propose the annexation of the West Bank.

The fact is that the Cabinet system broke down at the point at which its disciplines were rejected by an influential member whose voice resounded throughout the world, so that, when ambassadors came and said our policy is the following, they can have territory if they want peace, they would be told "Yes, but that isn't what Mr. Dayan says, and it's been on the television and we understand that this voice is the voice that also is linked to the hand that commands the military establishment." That was the difficulty that arose throughout the period, much more after Eshkol's death than before.

- Q. Didn't Mrs. Meir go a bit far in almost attempting to set up a parallel foreign service, by-passing the established ministry, as manifested, for example, by the fact that she allowed Itzhak Rabin to report directly to her when he was ambassador in Washington?
- A. She didn't ask him to report to her — she didn't direct him to report directly to her, and he didn't report directly to her — that is a ridiculous myth. He reported to her and to me, and there was never any problem. The tension that arose never had anything to do with the reporting procedure. No encroachment, no intervention. I think Mrs. Meir did the minimum that a prime minister must do in foreign policy, not the maximum. I am

afraid that, if I were Prime Minister, I would interfere much more. What is a prime minister's job? It is to take an interest in those matters on which the fate of the government or the coalition might depend. And there were some sectors, especially relating to the arms problem and our relations to the United States, in which a prime minister must take a preponderant role. But her role was exactly equivalent to the role of a British Prime Minister in foreign policy, or the PM of any other country — nothing eccentric at all. What I do find ridiculous is the foreign office patriotism that thinks that a prime minister or defense minister should not have a role in foreign policy at all.

Q. Was this subordination of foreign policy to defense policy simply imposed by the objective facts of Israel's situation, or were there other factors that contributed to it?

A. When a country's major foreign policy preoccupation is not to be wiped off the face of the earth, then of course security becomes a very important factor. I would say a foreign policy that subordinated security to something else would be very hard to understand. So that the large role of security considerations was important. What was the Foreign Office meant to do? It was meant to strengthen Israel's security by achieving a flow of arms, by achieving economic support, by achieving a minimal international understanding; but all of these are basically related to security. The distortion and magnification of this, however, arose from the fact that the Defense Ministry was more or less an independent government of its own. That is the truth.

This was reflected in its almost monopolistic control of the administered territories. There was once a committee. During Eshkol's period, there was a ministerial committee that supervised these matters. This was abolished, which meant that the Defense Ministry was really the sole government for all the areas under military control. It had the biggest budget, and the media were much more open to Dayan's voice than to any other. There is therefore a certain element of hypocrisy in the media writing about a *Mechdal* [Breakdown] after the '73 War. If you look at the people who wrote about that afterwards, they nearly all were part of the majority chorus of exuberant self-confidence before the war. In fact the media helped to create the *Mechdal* by an uncritical

acceptance of the militant view, which they were able to forget after 1973.

But security had this predominance, the biggest budget, the most powerful patronage, the easiest access to the media, the charismatic potential, and also, I should say, that — although this might arise with any prime minister — in a discussion between civilians and soldiers, Mrs. Meir tended to be very impressed by the soldiers. This in fact is what brought about the debacle in October 1973. The uniformed reporter had enormous weight because, as a final resort, if anything went wrong, national disaster could only happen on the military front; so that there was a tendency for an alignment between the prime minister and the defense establishment whenever there was some conflict about what to do. The feeling was that one could never go wrong by being a little too cautious and too pessimistic, but one might go wrong by being a little too optimistic.

Q. Let's turn to the role of the prime minister. First, what is your appraisal of Levi Eshkol as a policy-maker — what were his strengths and weaknesses?

A. I think he was the best of all our prime ministers because he had a capacity for balancing his views. He had a pluralistic view of the cabinet system. He did not disappear in charismatic fantasies, and he was capable of taking a different view in relationship to anybody, including the defense establishment; and that is why I think it is not an accident that we had nothing but success and victory during his tenure. Later on, the Defense Ministry and its incumbent minister tended to grow in influence and to dwarf the rest of the Cabinet. This might have been for reasons other than the relations with the prime minister, but it is a fact that, although in the domestic political context Mrs. Meir was aligned against Dayan, in security matters she was close to him. Later it became almost predictable that his view would be supported by her.

Q. Is it fair to say of Eshkol that he was very much a mediator and arbitrator, rather than an initiator who provided leadership in foreign policy and in defense?

A. No, it is not a fair criticism, because I think arbitration is the essence of the prime ministerial function. But he also offered strong leadership, as, for example, when we

made our peace approaches in 1967 when we initiated the communication with Jordan. From 1967 onward, when we sought contacts very widely, far afield in the Arab world, Eshkol was the leader. No, contrary to his image, I think he had the best conception of the prime ministerial function of any of the others, although some of them were more charismatic than he was. I think he has been the best of the Israeli prime ministers.

Q. I read that Eshkol's intimate forum for consultations on foreign policy and defense consisted of yourself, Moshe Dayan, Yigal Allon, Yigael Yadin, and Ya'acov Herzog. Is this accurate?

A. No, Yadin disappeared completely a few months after the war. Absolutely completely. There were only three or four weeks of participation, so he could not possibly be in that gallery. One would have to add Israel Galili. Eshkol also made a great effort to involve ministers like Moshe Haim Shapira because it was very important for us to have a moderate national religious party to offset the Likud party. But he even showed a capacity to associate with Menachem Begin and others, so that there was this smallish group, excluding Yadin. But there were two or three ministers, including Galili and Shapira, who were nearly always involved in our consultations. There was also a committee on security affairs, which was important. This was abolished and has not been reinstated in spite of the Agranat Commission's report.⁴ The two prime ministers who succeeded Eshkol were not able to find a formal platform smaller than the Cabinet as a whole, and therefore they have been thrown back on informal consultation.

Q. How smooth and effective was your own working relationship with Eshkol?

A. It was very smooth and very intimate. There was no inhibition. In fact, he was accessible. And the other ministers had the hope that he could be persuaded to listen to their views. Mrs. Meir had stronger preconceived ideas, and sometimes one felt that it was very unlikely that one could change her view unless one also got support from Dayan. But in general there was a feeling that, in a conflict between the Defense and Foreign Ministries, Defense would get the final word because of her feeling that a

diplomatic setback could not be fatal, whereas a military setback might be fatal.

Q. Can you elaborate on this, on Mrs. Meir's strength and weaknesses as a policy-maker in general?

A. Her strength lay in the fact that she could always carry the domestic consensus, and there was no risk that we would be unable to take the Knesset and the Cabinet with us. I am speaking in the light of subsequent events, when our policy was inhibited by the doubt of whether the Cabinet could carry a majority with it. Another strength was the closeness of her contacts with the President of the United States and with the American defense establishment.

The weakness was the tendency to be apocalyptic about the Arab world — not to believe in the possibility of a change —and also not to believe much in the value of semantic or tactical concessions. My own feeling was that, even if you were pessimistic about the Arab response, it was worth making tactical and semantic concessions — not to get the Arabs to support us, but in order to get a broader international support. Mrs. Meir was reluctant. For example, if one saw no purpose in Jarring's wanderings, she had no compunction in cutting him off; whereas I felt that even if there were no purpose in his wanderings, they did fill a certain vacuum and were better than no diplomatic activity at all.

The other weakness, which became evident during the Yom Kippur War (and this was the major one), was an uncritical approach to the advice of the Defense Establishment. This leads to the question: What does Israel need a prime minister for? One really needs a prime minister for the purpose of being able not to accept the views of the defense establishment. The other functions are much less important than that. Therefore, when a prime minister says, "What can I do? The generals all say the same thing. How can I not accept their view?" — that, I think, is a central weakness. The fact is that both Ben-Gurion and Eshkol, and Sharett during his brief tenure as prime minister, sometimes, or perhaps often, did not accept the military view, and therefore the prime minister did have this arbitrational flexibility. But Mrs. Meir herself has more or less said it on

security matters: "I could do nothing but blindly accept the military view." That is not the function of a prime minister.

- Q. Did Mrs. Meir's rise to power mark a fundamental change in Israel's foreign policy?
- A. Not in the official formulation of policy, which continued to be balanced and moderate. Our official formulations of policy did not cause any trouble for us. It was the deviation from them that caused us problems. Yet, I would say, being more skeptical about the value of exploring Arab attitudes, she tended not to explore them as intensively as did Eshkol. Also, she didn't believe in the value of verbal semantic tactical concession and was much more influenced by people like Galili and Dayan. In other words, if there was a question of formulation of policy, there was usually a pull. What was convenient in international terms was usually inconvenient in domestic terms, and she tended to put her ear closer to the domestic consensus than to what was needed internationally. To put it differently, she would prefer to defy foreign governments on behalf of domestic opinion than to defy domestic opinion on behalf of some international interest.
- Q. Decision-making in the Cabinet has been widely criticized for not being based on orderly staff work, on full information, on a clear definition of the various options. Is this a justified criticism?
- A. It is. I think that is one of the weaknesses of the Cabinet office in general. Ministers are given a minimal documentation. The habits of intuition and improvisation are very ingrained. Perhaps Israel is the triumph of improvisation. But the idea of studying papers that set out the pros and cons of situations is not very well received.
- I remember, for example, when the Cabinet was about to approve the raid on Beirut airport.⁵ I was against the raid, but I suggested as a delaying effort that we should postpone it for twenty-four hours, during which we and any other ministry that wanted to should present a list of the consequences, the pros and cons. What would happen militarily, what would happen regionally, what would happen internationally? I remember discussing what would happen to our relations with France. But the

committee of ministers refused to grant the twenty-four hours, and more or less said that, if anybody had something to say, let them say it now. This meant that the civil service level did not really have a chance to play much of a role. But I find that at almost every level — a great deal of talk and very little paperwork. I think that is a general description of the Israeli decision-making process in every field, including the security and diplomatic fields.

Q. Didn't this way of conducting affairs to some extent doom the government to reacting to events rather than initiating, because there was no forward-looking approach?

A. I wouldn't say there was no forward-looking approach. Ideas could be thrown out in Cabinet meetings; but in general I would say that the results of the 1967 War were to create a defensive psychology in two ways — militarily, and therefore politically. We were in possession of the field. We held the cards. The onus was upon the Arabs to change it. The strategy was, "Here we are. We have something that you want very much. Come and get it! And if you come and get it, we will offer you inducements. If you don't come to us, then we can sit here indefinitely." There was a feeling that the status quo, although not ideal, was by no means intolerable, and therefore it was up to the Arabs, who had most to gain, to take the initiative or to get people to take the initiative on their behalf.

Israel lacked nothing. In fact, it had rather more than it wanted. Why should we be the ones trying to change the situation? This was based on the fallacy to which I referred in my February 1973 speech — the idea that security consists mainly of its territorial component. It was believed that the Arabs needed the territories more than we needed peace. This turned out not to be correct. I would say that the absence of peace weighs upon Israel more than the absence of the territories weighs upon the Arab states. We may have exaggerated the intolerability to them of being without the territories.

This had its expression in the military field as well. Since they did not have anything that we wanted to capture, but rather had things we were willing to give back, we entrenched ourselves behind the Bar-Lev line and said that at least we can afford the

luxury of a non-preemptive strategy. We can sit here, and if they attack, we can respond. A preemptive strategy is the military side of an initiating foreign policy, but in both cases it was felt that we were in possession of the field; we have the assets, and this ought to induce in the Arabs a desire to change their views.

But we shouldn't underestimate the weakening effect of Arab policy on the moderates in Israel. The moderates got no encouragement at all from the Arab world. All the external evidence was in favor of the militant approach. If somebody said in 1973: "*We are successful wherever we look; the situation does not weigh upon us; wherever our military forces act, they show great mastery; most of the world maintains its relations with us, in fact increases them; the territories are not a handicap politically; the powers are not worrying us, neither the Four, nor the Two nor the United Nations.*" — I am afraid they had all the evidence on their side. If somebody said "*There is not an Arab government that would accept even the most minimal peace proposals that an Israeli could make,*" unfortunately that was the fact. So that, until October 1973, all the external evidence seemed to support the militant view.

- Q. Which body had the responsibility for coordinating the military and political aspects of Israeli policy into an overall strategy of national security?
- A. Well, that is the weakness to which I referred when I said that, apart from the Cabinet itself, there was no intermediate body for the analysis of options. Nothing like the National Security Council. The nearest approach was what one would call the kitchen; namely, the habit of almost daily consultation between the prime minister, foreign minister, defense minister, deputy prime minister, Israel Galili, and one or two others. That was a very useful forum for ministerial coordination, but it did tend to exclude the civil service level. The kitchen was a Cabinet kitchen, whereas a National Security Council gives very great weight to specialized advice. I think that under the Cabinet kitchen system, which has prevailed under all our prime ministers, the role of the permanent official in the Israeli government is a very difficult one to maintain. So long as our prime ministers have been, and still are, rather hostile to institutionalized

processes of consultation, this is at the base of some of our present tensions as well.

Because the Cabinet is a weak technical body, the Prime Minister's Office is also very slender, consisting of only a director general and one or two people. It is nothing like a prime minister's office in other countries. What was asked at the beginning about the prime minister building a separate civil service — the opposite is true. The Prime Minister's Office is not a department at all. It is a minister with two or three people. Under those conditions, the absence of a permanent body for confrontation between conflicting views has been marked, except insofar as the Cabinet Committee on Security actually played that role. I think that toward the end, it was playing that role — I forget whether we were even meeting officially, but I do remember meetings of five or six or seven ministers, with the intelligence and military chiefs becoming more and more prominent as the period went on. Toward the end, we would very rarely have a week without one or two meetings at that level. It was not institutionalized — there was something almost subterranean about it. We felt guilty toward the other fifteen ministers who were not there.

But I think that the Agranat Commission exaggerated the effect of procedural elements in what went wrong in October 1973. It was much more the psychology of national confidence developed through the defense minister, through the press, through a very right-wing press, with the support of the Arabs. There was an objective alliance between the Israeli hawks and the Arabs in the sense that the Arabs did everything that would fortify the appraisals of the militant view in Israel, while those holding moderate views could never rely on anything substantial in their support from the Arab side.

- Q. Wouldn't an alternative channel for evaluations have been a vital safeguard against this national euphoria and overconfidence? Wasn't one of the weaknesses of the Cabinet that it allowed itself to become dependent on one channel of evaluation?
- A. Yes, that is the case. I think a pluralism of intelligence would have been useful. Whether it would have led to a pluralism of appraisals, I don't know. Sometimes there was a refusal even to look at military appraisals that descended from the establishment. There

was the celebrated case of Lieutenant Siman-Tov's appraisal on the eve of the Yom Kippur War. That came from within the *Aman* establishment, but it was not in accordance with official doctrine, and therefore never reached higher levels.

Q. Was there an increase in the influence of the military after 1967, and if so, why?

A. An enormous increase. The spectacular results of their operations gave them tremendous weight. They lost their anonymity; they became known, they became charismatic; albums, medals. It was they who fixed the normative values of Israeli society.

Q. When exactly did the practice begin of inviting senior generals to report to the Cabinet directly, and what were the implications of this?

A. Mr. Ben-Gurion never invited a general to attend a Cabinet meeting. It was part of his views on the separation of functions. Later on, during Eshkol's tenure, the Chiefs-of-Staff used to report. One reason was that Eshkol, being both the prime minister and the defense minister, could not have the same intimate knowledge of the Defense Ministry as a separate minister would have had, and therefore the Chief-of-Staff used to attend. Then there was the habit to hear about Arab preparations, so *Rosh Aman* [Director of Military Intelligence] used to be invited.

When Dayan became Defense Minister, one would have thought that he would have made do with his own reporting. However, he, more than any of the other defense ministers invited the Chiefs-of-Staff to report to the Cabinet, sometimes even while he dissented from their views. I think he wanted to share responsibility for operations, but by the end of Eshkol's period, there would be three or four military officers at each Cabinet meeting in addition to the Defense Minister.

Q. Did the heightened self-confidence of the high command strengthen the position of the hard-line ministers in the Cabinet?

A. Yes, certainly, especially because, as I have said already, they had evidence for their

confidence. They wanted to go into Beirut — they got into Beirut. If they wanted to liberate a Sabena liner, they did it. If they wanted to go to Sinai and bring back very valuable Soviet-made radar installations, they succeeded. Whatever they touched seemed to be successful, and therefore there was no reason to surround their views with skepticism. Also, I think people liked to believe the best. When, in addition to this evidence, the military said: *“We have tremendous superiority. The Arabs are intimidated; they will not try anything serious. They do not have the capacity for victory, and therefore they won't try.”* — and when this was supported with tremendous doctrinal heat by the heads of *Aman*, especially after Eli Zeira took over, then everyone accepted this evaluation. The emphasis, the dogmatism of it, all were very impressive.

- Q. Can one go as far as to say that the General Staff was not only more than a neutral agency executing government policy, but that it became a pressure group pushing for particular policies in the conflict?
- A. Yes, it had a doctrine that it was unwilling to examine critically. The Agranat Commission revealed this. Having achieved a certain appraisal, the General Staff was reluctant, even as late as the 4th or 5th of October to revise it. It refused to acknowledge that it might have been wrong. It refused to acknowledge that the Arab troop concentrations might mean war because to have acknowledged that would have been to discredit its previous appraisals, and, of course, when it came to making proposals for military counteractions, its views were predominant. Now, since it was expected that the military would propose military action, when the military said there was no need to do anything, this was all the more impressive — and why should anybody be “more Catholic than the Pope”? If the military establishment did not think you had to have mobilization, it seemed absurd for civilian ministers to be more exacting than they were.
- Q. Was the High Command decisive in shaping Israel's response to President Sadat's proposal for an interim settlement in 1971?⁶
- A. Yes. On one hand, it was Dayan's proposal that we should attempt to withdraw from the

Suez Canal in return for some defusing of the conflict. On the other hand, when the High Command said that we cannot go back more than fifteen kilometers, or that we cannot have any Egyptian forces across the river, that tended to be decisive. But here we have the unexpected spectacle of the military High Command making recommendations against their own minister, because Dayan was prepared for greater flexibility on that front than they were.

Q. Did the military also gain in influence because the ministers were divided among themselves?

A. The real reason was that the material under discussion was military material. The question was: How do we appraise the order of battle on the other side? What is the military intention of the enemy, and what do we do in response? These questions required a certain technical jargon and a certain technical knowledge — specialized knowledge — in which the khaki uniform and the stars on the shoulder had a very large effect. Many thought it would be irresponsible to overrule the military in favor of caution.

Q. Finally, limited military action in the form of reprisal raids is a vital instrument of Israeli statecraft in dealing with the Arabs. Moshe Sharett's diaries are full of instances of his being kept in the dark. What was your experience as Foreign Minister? Were you regularly and adequately informed about the scale and objective of raids, and did you have any control over this lever of policy?

A. Well, there were two conditions under which this kind of military response was initiated. First, a formal request, in which I was always involved, would be made for approval for some military action. But, in an enormous proportion of the operations, such action was reported only afterwards — that, for this reason or another reason, the operation had developed in much greater scale than the Cabinet had approved or that anyone had planned. But what could then be done? If you take the Karamah raid in 1968 against the PLO base, there was the statement that unexpectedly a large unit of the

Jordanian Army was in the way. Going back to the first Gaza raid in 1955 (I forget what the rationale was), something that was planned to be limited turned out to be much greater. Of course, the classic instance was the raid in 1968 on Beirut which was supposed to be a symbolic attack on one airplane to prove the possibility of omnipresence. For some reasons, which I cannot remember, the statement was that, when we arrived there, we saw that there were thirteen planes; it would be a pity not to blow them all up! So there was this disparity between the cautious Cabinet authorization and the way in which that authorization was expanded, which was only possible because the responsible minister knew that nothing could happen to him because of his decisive position within the parliamentary framework. One could not do without him, and therefore nothing would happen if there was a disparity between what had been approved and what was carried out.

NOTES

1. Dr. Gunnar Jarring was appointed as U N representative to the Middle East to implement resolution 242.
2. On 8 February 1971, Dr. Jarring addressed to Egypt and Israel identical questionnaires in an attempt to reconcile their interpretations of United Nations resolution 242. He was satisfied with the Egyptian reply but not with the Israeli reply.
3. A small party that broke away from Mapai in 1965. Its leaders were David Ben-Gurion and Moshe Dayan. In the crisis of May-June 1967, Rafi joined Mapai in a national unity government and Dayan became Minister of Defense.
4. The commission of inquiry, headed by Supreme Court President Dr. Shimon Agranat, appointed to investigate the failure to anticipate the Arab attack in October 1973.
5. The IDF raid on Beirut's international airport was carried out on 28

December 1968 in retaliation for an attack by the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine on an El-Al plane. Thirteen civilian airliners were destroyed. The damage was estimated at more than a hundred million dollars. The United Nations Security Council condemned the raid. France imposed a complete embargo on the supply of arms and spare parts to Israel.

6. On 4 February 1971, President Sadat publicly proposed to Israel an interim settlement based on the reopening of the Suez Canal and a partial withdrawal of the Israeli troops on the eastern bank of the canal. Mrs. Meir's government rejected this offer.