



By Mark Bruzonsky



# The real Shimon Peres

## A very candid talk with General Peled

"WHAT HE'S doing is just unbelievable... He is formulating positions in a way that is less obnoxious and many people fall for it, they think he really means it."

This is what Israeli General Mattiyahu Peled told me a few weeks ago in Jerusalem about Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres. Peled's words reminded me of a comment the assassinated PLO leader Isam Sartawi once made about Peres. "The Labour Party is more dangerous for us than the Likud," Sartawi told a Le Monde interviewer in 1981, "because the language and methods it uses are more acceptable to international public opinion. But asking us to choose between Begin and Peres is the same as asking whether we prefer to die by drowning or strangulation."

Yet Shimon Peres is such a relief for so many Israelis and Israeli supporters. After years of Likud domination and the rhetoric of Menachem Begin, Yitzhak Shamir and Ariel Sharon, Peres is a man calm in demeanour eloquent in words, moderate in policies. Such, at least, is the image Peres works overtime to foster. And in the US where many of Israel's supporters had been holding their breath through the Likud era, Peres is something of a hero. His UN speech was greeted with great acclaim. Jewish leaders, including such personalities as Seagram's Chairman and World Jewish Congress Edgar Bronfman, host him when he visits American shores, raise funds for his re-election, and tout his virtues with Washington officials.

And yet, the actual policies, rather than the words and style of Shimon Peres seem in startling contradiction to the man's image. The situation in the occupied territories is worse today for the Palestinians than ever before even recent front-page reports in the New York Times tell this story. Israeli involvement in southern Lebanon and preparations for an increasingly likely conflict with Syria continue. The Tunis assassination attempt on Yasser Arafat was crafted by Peres and Rabin. The law making illegal contact with the PLO is going forward in the Knesset while the Labour Party's "Toilet Faction" looks the other way. Why the nickname "Toilet Faction"? Because courageous Labour Knesset members have a tendency to pass up voting on such controversial legislation and use the excuse that they must have had to go to the bathroom.

As is usually the case, much of the world's press reports what is easy to come by — speeches, press releases, carefully-controlled interviews. The reality of Shimon Peres is thus obscured behind a public relations screen dedicated to enhancing the image of Peres, the Labour Party, and Israel... in that order it seems.

Most importantly, of course, Peres wants to create an image within his country that will make possible his re-election. Though he may well be just as tough and just as determined not to compromise with Palestinian nationalism as is Likud, Peres knows he can't outflank Likud from the right. Accordingly he has to pursue his

actual hard-line policies while at the same time encouraging the image of being the leader who is more moderate and more reasonable, the leader who can best bring about peace and security while enhancing Israel's tarnished image abroad. Reality is far less important than image for Shimon Peres. But just what is that reality?

Matti Peled is an Israeli who knows Israel intimately and who isn't afraid to speak up. A former member of the Israeli Army's General Staff, former Military Governor of the Gaza Strip, and an Arabic scholar who now serves in the Knesset — one of two members of the joint Jewish-Arab Progressive List — Peled spoke to me about Peres over breakfast a few weeks ago at East Jerusalem's American Colony Hotel.

**BRUZONSKY:** What are the things that he (Peres) is doing that are so obnoxious, that are so bad.

**PELED:** He's doing exactly what Begin did and I don't believe he has any other aim or goal. They are just the same. He has a different style. And he is willing to take a longer time to accomplish things. And so he is continuing the same traditional style of the Labour Party, but he has absolutely none of the compromising attitudes which, say, were characteristic of Ben-Gurion. He is not going to compromise.

**Q:** What does he want to accomplish, what's his bottom line?

**A:** I think his bottom line is the full annexation of the occupied territories.

**Q:** The full annexation... legal?

**A:** The full annexation, legal, yes....

**Q:** With citizenship for the residents?

**A:** No... they are talking about territories, they don't talk about residents.

**Q:** So what will happen to the more than a million Palestinians?

**A:** Well this is a problem they will have to contend with. They are not going to be citizens. They may have to leave. But the question is how to do it in way that will not cause too much trouble.

**Q:** So what Peres is doing is all a sop for the Americans?

**A:** Right, right right.

**Q:** I've met a lot of people in this country who believe deeply in the sincerity of Peres.

**A:** They are either insincere or fools.

**Q:** So what's this all leading to?

**A:** I believe it is all leading to a continuation of the war; maybe another break out of a war.

**Q:** Isn't Arafat likely to be discredited and go under in this period? What's he got to hold on to?

**A:** I think Arafat could — I'm not judging what he should do — but I think he could embarrass Peres much more...

**Q:** By calling his bluff.

**A:** Yes. He could embarrass him much more. The trouble is that for his own reasons he's playing the same game. He's allowing Peres

to continue the game. Now this could be countered by a more audacious position taken by Arafat, if indeed he wants to embarrass Peres.

**Q:** I don't think he knows how.

**A:** Maybe he does know how, and maybe he has other compelling reasons for not doing it. From the meetings I have had with Arafat I came to the conclusion that he is very well acquainted with the situation in Israel. Nobody can sell him any nonsense. He knows

A. I expect that things will be at the same place — but more settlements, greater chauvinism, greater racism and anti-Arab sentiments. And the Labour Party will probably be more to the right then it is now — it's right enough, but even more to the right. They are trying not to lose the election. If an initiative is expected from any of the local factors, it is hopeless, it is hopeless. It must come from outside. And therefore I thought it was a bit of good news hearing that the United States is now look-

**A:** It may be... But if there is any grain of truth in it then this is hopeful.

**Q:** Washington is too penetrated by Israeli agents to allow even a naive President to go very far forward.

**A:** Yes, I know. I mean I'm not developing any illusions, but if there is any indication that the United States might move in this direction then there might be some hope.

**Q:** You're talking about Nahum Goldmann's imposed settlement? (Note: Goldmann, when President of both the World Zionist Organization and the World Jewish Congress became the proponent of the thesis that a settlement "imposed" on Israel by the superpowers was the only way to bring about a political solution acceptable to the Palestinians; and that such an imposed settlement would also be in the long-term interest of Israel and the Jewish people.)

**A:** Right, there's no other way, absolutely no other way. Just like after the war in '56. When the two superpowers decided that something shall be done it was done. And I think here we are in the same situation. If they will agree on a solution then it will have to be accepted.



Peres: The other face of Likud



Peled: Arafat was the target of Tunis raid

what's the situation. The question which I ask is why doesn't he exploit the situation which he knows so well. And the only answer I have is that he has other considerations...

**Q:** (Asked about whether Peres tried to kill Arafat in Tunis, Peled responded.)

**A:** ...I have no doubt about that. The fact that he failed makes them present it now as if they didn't mean it. But I have no doubt.

**Q:** And the purpose was?

**A:** To disrupt the February agreement which really worried them very much. If Arafat is killed then the whole peace process would be put off for a number of years. They are not anxious to get anything really accomplished, except annexation. So anything which delays the process is welcome.

**Q:** And were the Americans in on it do you think?

**A:** I'm sure the Americans were in on it at least technically. I don't think the airplanes could make this distance without some assistance.

**Q:** Someone told me that when he saw the ruins and saw the precision bombing on Arafat's headquarters he was then convinced that the attempt was on Arafat's life.

**A:** There's no doubt. Also (there was) complete carelessness here regarding the Jewish community. For the Jewish community in Tunisia was really a catastrophe. And many here have begun to realize that it was such a reckless thing to do... In any case... the people responsible are shrewd enough to see the consequences; and I think they want these consequences. Right now, for instance, they are very happy that Peres has improved his image, that Israel is seen again as a country which seeks a settlement and that it's only due to the other side that nothing is moving.

**Q:** Where do you think we will be in 5 years?

ing more favourably on the idea of an international peace conference.

**Q:** Don't you think this is just part of the public relations...

**MARK A. BRUZONSKY** has written about the Arab-Israeli conflict and US East policy for the past 10 years. His articles, interviews and analyses have been published widely throughout the US, Europe, the Middle East and Pakistan.