

FORUM



URI AVNERI TALKS OF: Arafat - doing a good job Begin - losing public confidence Carter - everything wrong Weizmann - transformed

A Palestinian state "will terminate the radicalisation process of the Palestinian people", Israeli publisher and political activist Uri Avneri told *Mark Bruzonsky*. Since 1948 Avneri has advocated the two state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian confrontation. In 1950 he purchased a then family magazine, *Ha'olam Haze* (This World). Today this weekly is a mass-circulation news magazine combined with a forum for aggressive political exposes of economic and political corruption. It has also become a champion of the Palestinian cause.

Avneri established contact with senior PLO officials in 1974, when the PLO's posture was shifting toward the two-state approach. He became one of the leaders in the Israeli Council for Israeli-Palestinian Peace which established official contact with the PLO in mid-1976. In March 1977 he helped create the Shelli Party, which gained two seats in the 1977 elections. As the third candidate on Shelli's list Avneri will return to the Knesset under a rotational scheme adopted by the party. When he was in the Knesset from 1965 to 1973 he was a thorn in the Labour Party establishment. Golda Meir once took the Knesset rostrum to declare "I am ready to mount the barricades in order to expel Avneri from the Knesset."

Bruzonsky: How do you characterise Israel's political environment today? What is the strength of Likud and of the Labour Party?

Avneri: Begin has lost the confidence of the upper class in Israel, by which I mean the well-educated, established people. These people are becoming extremely disillusioned by Begin — not only by his politics, but also by his personality.

Of course Begin is not, and never has been, a real Israeli in the sense of having an Israeli style in thinking and in talking. This is now becoming much more pronounced in the last few months. The style of Mr Begin is irritating a bigger and bigger number of Israelis. This, by the way, finds its statistical expression in public opinion polls where Mr Begin, while still commanding a great majority, is steadily declining.

What this means in political terms is difficult to forecast. Likud — together with its allies — has a majority in Parliament and this is reflected in Knesset votes. But this doesn't really mean anything at all beyond day-to-day practical politics, because the question is how will this majority stand up in a real political crisis. For example, if public opinion in this country reaches a point where enough people realise that Begin has personally become an obstacle to peace how will this influence his standing inside the Likud bloc, inside the government coalition and inside the country at large?

As long as things go on as this — there's no real American pressure, and people still are not quite conscious of a crisis with Egypt — then Begin can go on as he does. He's being attacked and he reacts. A lot of people have their doubts about his mental stability now, but this can go on.

But if any of these things assume crisis proportions things may happen. There can be a kind of civilian public uprising. This has happened in Israel before. It's one of the characteristics of Israel that in certain situations the public becomes disgusted with the political establishment and starts to make peaceful, non-violent protest demonstrations which sometimes have a very interesting and big impact on political life.

□ It is generally argued that if the US were to create or let be created a political crisis with Israel — try to push Israel or impose on Israel — this would unify Israelis behind the Government, not bring it down.

○ Either thing can happen. You can't plan. It depends how it looks to the public and how the public reacts to this. If it's done in a brutal and harsh way the public may say we can't let our government be pushed around.

The peculiarity of this kind of thing is that it's quite impossible to calculate what will happen in advance because of the many imponderables. First there is a crystallisation of public opinion in a certain direction under the impact of events. Then politicians react to public opinion. Everybody thinks its now popular to do this and not to do something else. And then the political establishment, in

some way not easy to forecast, adjusts itself to the new public climate.

For example, when this new movement started, the "Peace Now" movement, it looked like the beginning of this kind of process. It had a big momentum. Then, for some reason which is very difficult to analyse, it suddenly got bogged down. And today it is bogged down. It's not the same as it was two or three months ago. Now tomorrow this may change again.

□ Assuming there were a crisis and Likud and Begin did lose public confidence completely, what is the state of the Labour Party? Is it capable of taking over and asserting a more flexible leadership?

○ First of all, losing confidence in Begin and losing confidence in Likud are two different things. In the Likud you have Ezer Weizmann, you have the Liberal Party. The Likud is not a unified party, it's a bloc with many different components and the change may first of all try to take expression in the Likud itself.

For example, if Mr. Begin for some reason, let's say for reasons of health, was compelled to lay down power, the whole process would happen differently than if Mr. Begin were there in full command.

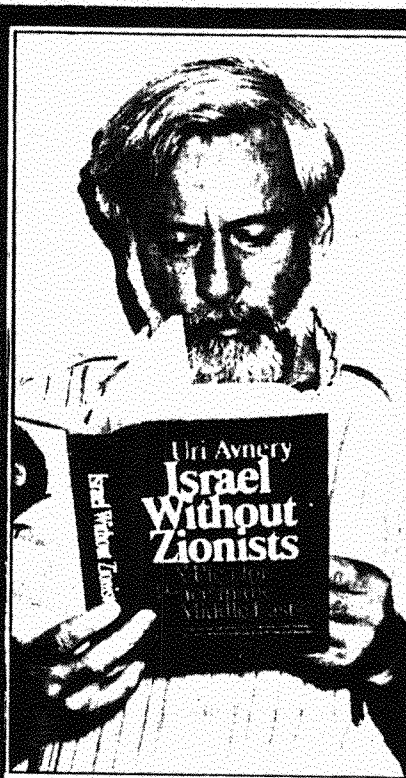
□ Before talking further about Weizmann and other potential Likud leaders, what is the state of the Labour Party?

○ The Labour Party was in a very sorry state after its tremendous election defeat — totally demoralised and disoriented. The first year after nothing happened to change this. There is no new leadership in the Labour Party at all. Nothing new is emerging there — not one new leadership personality has emerged since the defeat. There are no new groupings or realignments inside the Labour Party. Everyone has been totally demoralised, even ideologically.

There was no real criticism of Begin during this year. Some poked at Begin from the left, others from the right. As a matter of fact, the Labour Party has criticised Begin for being too eager to give Sinai to Sadat, for being too ready to give up the Jewish settlements in North Sinai. They've even criticised Begin's so-called "administrative autonomy" proposal for the West Bank as being dangerous because it might lead to a Palestinian state. It means they have tried to outflank Begin on the right, something absolutely ridiculous! And they are still continuing with this line. It shows the total disorientation of the party. They thought that the country had been shifting to the right and that they must shift to the right with it otherwise they'll lose even more.

□ But you've implied that Labour is improving now.

○ Yes, all this has been partly changed by the recent Kreisky initiative. Austrian Chancellor Kreisky brought Labour leader Shimon Peres to Vienna and got him to meet Sadat. And when Begin reacted the way he did the Labour Party became, to a certain extent, revitalised. It got a new confidence. Peres himself, who is a very shifty kind of fellow, suddenly sees himself in the role of an elder statesman, with a



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new political line. This concept of territorial compromise is nonsense by itself, but still looks more moderate than the Begin stand. It's nonsense because not one single Arab who I know would agree to what the Labour Party calls a territorial compromise. But it's not nonsense in the sense that this might be a step forward in getting negotiations going again.

□ You have just written a rather positive article about Ezer Weizmann for *Der Spiegel*. Why does someone like you who's known for advocating Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories and creation of a Palestinian state hope for Weizmann to take over from Begin?

○ One has to start with the assumption that there's not going to be a revolution in Israel in the near future, that the programme of my party, Shelli, has no chance of becoming overnight the majority opinion in Israel. And therefore we are looking inside the existing establishment for the best choice there is.

Weizmann, to my mind, is now the best choice because he has undergone a transformation since the Sadat visit. I would say he is perhaps the only one in Israeli

government circles who really grasped the historical significance of Sadat's visit, who really understands the historical chance of achieving peace.

□ Which brings up the question what are Egypt's minimum goals, what is the bottom line for Egypt in making a settlement just supposing there was a Weizmann negotiating with Sadat?

○ Exactly nobody knows for sure. If Ezer Weizmann could make a separate peace with Egypt leaving the West Bank in Israeli hands he probably would. But if Weizmann comes to the opinion that the West Bank cannot remain in Israeli hands if he wants a peace with Egypt he will become flexible on the West Bank and look for solutions which, to his mind, safeguard Israeli security while not keeping the West Bank as Israeli territory.

This raises the question, what will Egypt really do, how far are they committed in not making a separate peace in practice as distinguished from theory and rhetoric? That they are looking for some statement of intentions in order to bring the West Bank theory into the framework of an Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty is clear. The question is, is this enough, will they be satisfied with this or will they really want to make an Israeli-Egyptian peace conditional on a real solution for the West Bank and the Palestinians?

I hope they do, because, as an Israeli, I do not believe that a separate Israeli-Egyptian peace is valuable in the long term, or that it's in Israel's interests to have a separate peace. I believe that it's in the interests of Israel to utilise the present situation in order to get a general solution. In this I am a heretic in Israel because the general opinion is, of course, the opposite. It would be stupid for Israel, I think, to make a separate peace solving only one thing, because this one thing will not withstand the test of time if the conflict itself is not liquidated.

To put it in practical terms. Assuming for a minute that we do achieve a separate peace, but that the general turmoil in the Arab world continues, that the Palestinians remain the radicalising factor in the Arab world, that the Arab-Israeli conflict continues. Can one really believe that Egypt could stand outside this process, or do we have to believe that Egypt will be drawn into it sooner or late whether it wants it or not? Let's not forget that Egypt was drawn into the whole thing in 1948 against its wishes. All the pressures of the Arab world are operating on Egypt and in Egypt. This will happen again, even if not tomorrow. It will happen in five years or 10 years — the whole thing will start again.

□ Is there a solution short of a Palestinian state?

○ I don't think so. I think a Palestinian state is the solution. And I believe it's a good solution for Israel. This is heretical in Israel to most people, but by no means to all people including some in official circles.

□ That's interesting. Who in Israel is in favour of a Palestinian state assuming that you are able to find Palestinians to talk to and to work out security arrangements with?

○ Without mentioning names I know of two or three extremely important army officers — present and past. Some of the most important strategic thinkers believe that this is the best solution for Israel — that an independent Palestinian state which will have to safeguard its own independent interests will be bound to be an element for peace in the Middle East and an element for security.

□ I assume you are talking about negotiating for such a state with Fatah?

○ I mean a state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip which I believe would have to be negotiated with the PLO, which means practically Arafat. And I believe that such a state will terminate the radicalisation process of the Palestinian people. Once they have achieved a minimum state in which they can live and solve their problems they will have an interest, like every people in the world, to safeguard their national institutions and their national identity. This will be a normalisation not only of the Palestinian people, but also a normalisation of Israel and a normalisation of the status quo in general.

□ How many Knesset members, not mentioning names, do you think could be brought to favour creation of a Palestinian state?

○ Depends when. Today, there has been such a demonology created around the PLO and the idea of a Palestinian state that very few people would be willing publicly to admit that they are in favour of it. Today you have only the five communist members and the two Shelli members. And there are a small number of people in Mapam and the Labour Party who would subscribe to this half-heartedly today. But when you speak with people seriously and privately you find that there are a much greater number of people who are open-minded about this, who say that if the PLO really changes its public stand it can make it possible for people in Israel to mention the PLO without immediately invoking the association of terrorism and the idea of the liquidation of Israel. Then they would be able to advocate a Palestinian state.

□ You were one of the Israelis that started meeting with the PLO in 1976. Lova Eliav was another and he now feels very negatively about Arafat's leadership of the PLO. He has even called him a "petty, little man". What do you think about Arafat and the present state of the PLO?

○ I started to have contact with the PLO long before this. I was in contact with the late Said Hammami in London from late 1974. And, of course, for me this was not the beginning of something, but the continuation of something, because I've been in favour of a Palestinian state since 1948. In the fifties I drew up and published a plan for a Palestinian state.

Now with all respect to my friend Lova, I don't think he's an expert on the Palestinian question. I think he doesn't realise the terms of reference of Yasser Arafat. Lova looks at it from the Israeli side only and thinks that if Arafat would have done this or that, he would have made our job

in Israel much easier. And he is understandably angry at Arafat for not doing these things. But if you look at things objectively, dispassionately, unemotionally, to think what is the situation of the Palestinian people, what is the situation of the PLO, what is the situation of Fatah inside the PLO and Arafat inside Fatah — if you take all these practical, political things into consideration you cannot really criticise Arafat. I think he's done a remarkable job as a person who has created some kind of Palestinian consensus in the most incredible circumstances. And he has further been up against the manoeuvrings of all the Arab states, each one of whom has promoted a different section of the Palestinian people in order to achieve different aims.

Holding things together is already a remarkable achievement. Surviving as the leader of this consensus for such a long time is a remarkable achievement too. And of course for the Palestinian people the consolidation of recognised and accepted

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national institutions in the situation they are in is such an important and overwhelming thing that one has first of all to judge leadership in respect to this achievement.

□ What specifically should the PLO do?

○ The PLO will have to achieve a consensus which makes it possible for its leadership to say that whatever the historical circumstances were, whatever happened in this country, now it is a fact that there are two peoples, two nations, living in what used to be Palestine. Neither of these can remove the other and, therefore, both have to live with each other. They absolutely cannot live in the same state and therefore there has to be two states and therefore the national aspirations of the Palestinian people will have to be realised in the framework of an independent Palestinian national state in the West Bank and Gaza. Since this can only be achieved in agreement with Israel, direct contacts and peace negotiations will have to happen sooner or later. Therefore, if they criticise Sadat they should make it clear that they do not do so because he recognises the fact of Israel and wants to make peace, but because, as Palestinians, they may think that Sadat shouldn't have acted without the Palestinians.

The question, then, is could Sadat have acted with the Palestinians? They did not really make it possible for Sadat to start his negotiations with a Palestinian partner. So I think they must make clear in the most unequivocal terms that the historical

objective of preventing Israel from coming into being and then to destroy Israel has to be openly abandoned and a new objective adopted.

□ Two months ago in *Forum*, Hisham Sharabi outlined the possibility of such a two-stage historical compromise, but he insisted that the Zionist, racist attitudes in Israel would have to end before full peace is achieved. You're one of the few Israelis famous in the Arab world because your book, *Israel Without Zionists*, is on many Arab bookshelves. What are your feelings about Zionism today?

○ The term has lost its exact definition, no one quite knows when one says "I am a Zionist" or "I am an anti-Zionist" what it means. If Zionism means Israeli patriotism, or the belief in the continued existence of Israel I certainly am a Zionist.

□ As a Jewish state, a Jewish homeland, with the Law of Return and a special Jewish character?

○ A state which is as Jewish as France is French or Germany is German. Which doesn't mean that the Germans have a particular privilege in that state. Citizens must be equal, whatever their backgrounds. But as a state which more or less allows a nation to express its personality in their own state. I want Israel to exist — though I advocate many reforms including changes in the relationship between Arabs and Jews inside Israel — as a state, the majority of which is Jewish and, therefore, expresses a Jewish personality. This I am for and if this means Zionist I am a Zionist.

If Zionism means the belief that 15 million Jews will one day gather in Israel, I don't believe in it, I think it's obsolete.

□ What is your reaction to this statement by Hisham Sharabi? "If we are going to live together in other than a suspicious, hostile existence, Zionism has to go". Then I asked him, "Does a Jewish state stay?" And he added, "Yes, anything. I don't know how the operation, the excision, is going to take place and keep the body — whatever body — they want to keep, I want the racism out. Because this is the barrier between Jews and Arabs in the Middle East today."

○ I agree this is what many Arabs think. But this is an immensely complicated subject. Israel is a state born in unique circumstances, the outcome of a great historical movement with an ideology of some very good, and let's admit, some very bad points. Creating a state which has continued in war for more than 30 years now, can you say that there are inherent attitudes that cannot be changed? Or do you rather have to say that once you have peace most of these attitudes will disappear?

Not without a struggle, of course. But you must rely on us in Israel to fight our own battles and you must say that if you have a state of peace — if Palestinians and Israelis live together in two states, but in the same country with lots of relationships and daily contact — then people like myself will have a chance to fight for those reforms which we want to fight for and we have a far bigger chance to succeed.

I could say exactly the same about the

Palestinians by the way — I could say that we can never live together until the Palestinian people eradicate from themselves the terrorists and the ultra-chauvinistic elements — people whose slogan is the liquidation of Israel. I don't say this because I understand the Palestinians, as they are a result of their own historical experience. I'm sure once there is a Palestinian state living in peace, the existence of this state will change a lot of things in the Palestinian people putting an end to certain tendencies which have been the outcome of a state of war.

□ Let me shift to the US. How do you assess the Carter Administration's performance since the Sadat initiative?

○ Of course I can't help being extremely disappointed by the Carter Administration. Either they don't do what should be done, or if they decide to do it at long last they don't do it the way I think it should be done.

Of course one realises the domestic problems of the American Administration when one realises the pressures being exerted. Therefore, it's easy to understand why they don't do what they should do and why they are doing things which perhaps they should not do.

I believe it was wrong for Carter to celebrate Begin when he came over the first time and therefore Carter gave an enormous push to Begin at a time when the Israeli public was still doubtful about Begin and a little bit afraid that Begin's chauvinistic attitudes were going to cause damage to Israel.

□ Not to mention American Jewish attitudes?

○ Exactly. When Begin came back as the victor in triumph from America he got the power base which now enables him to reject American initiatives. I never quite understood why it was done unless they had the most curious misconceptions about Begin.

□ What has the US done wrong in the last year and a half?

○ I think everything. Absolutely everything. They should have made it quite clear what the American attitude is. They should have used American influence — and, of course, America has an enormous influence upon Israel — by keeping a very clear line: we want this, this is how we see the future, this is what American interests require.

□ Well, not everything. Carter came into office pursuing the policies outlined in the Brookings Report, advocating a "Palestinian homeland".

○ Same as with Nixon if I may mention the name. Nixon came to power. After a year or so there was the famous Rogers Plan — which was an extremely good plan. And then when there was a Jewish and Israeli opposition he just forgot about the whole thing.

Here came Carter. He said for the first time candidly things which had to be said about a Palestinian homeland. And then he said he didn't mean it all, that he meant something quite different. You can't command respect and really compel the



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Israeli public to treat America seriously if the American line changes every two days because some senator says something.

□ What about the joint statement with the Soviet Union on 1 October 1977? Was that not the right thing to do?

○ That was a curious thing, because, what did they do? They made a statement with the Soviet Union — which on the whole was a good statement. Then they immediately retreated by making a joint statement with Israel saying something quite different.

□ Well, they say there was a revolt against the US-USSR joint statement in the US.

○ OK. If you are a politician either you make an assessment before hand and say that this is a policy I can't conduct and therefore let's not announce it. But if you do announce a policy then you should be ready to sustain it and fight for it.

One thing the Americans have in common with the Palestinians, with the Arabs, is the tendency to think Israel is a monolithic thing, acting like one man who happens to be the prime minister at any given time. Perhaps they come to this conviction because they look at American Jews who

monolithically support — or used to anyway — any prime minister.

But if you believe a certain policy is good then your policy should be formed in such a way that you encourage the elements in Israel which are working for this kind of solution and discourage the kind of people working against your policies. What the Americans are doing, and also our Palestinian friends, is exactly the opposite.

□ What now in Israel? How do you now view Begin? You wrote a few months after Sadat's Jerusalem visit "The big question now is: What will Begin do if peace cannot be reconciled with his ideology? The fate of the Middle East... may well depend on the answer. It is a battle that will have to be fought in the heart and mind of Begin himself. On the one hand, the temptation to make peace is immense. If he achieves this, his name will be inscribed forever in the annals of Jewish history: Ben-Gurion created the State of Israel, Begin gave it peace. But equally great is his loyalty to the cause, the teachings of Jabotinsky, the land of Israel."

○ The question has had a final answer. Begin has not been able to change his historical objective for a newer, much more important one. Therefore we must now think how to remove Begin and what to do afterwards. This now is the big question.

I'm rather sorry about this. I've always had a certain respect for Mr Begin. But I must draw the conclusion that he's not a big enough personality to adjust himself to a totally new historical situation, which is exactly what Ezer Weizmann has done — perhaps because he's younger, less dogmatic, because he's a military man and used to adapting himself to new circumstances.

There's absolutely no hope that Mr. Begin will change his opinion. He is now the great obstacle to movement towards peace and must be removed.

You quoted me about Begin. I would now change this quotation, enlarge on it. I said at that time that the decisive battle was being fought inside the mind of Menachem Begin. I would say now that the decisive battle is really being fought inside the mind of the Israeli people. The more that can be done to provide ammunition and reinforcements to the forces inside the Israeli mind willing to take the great leap into peace, into unknown territory, the more chances it will really happen.

I'm quite sure that even today, if you really could talk heart to heart with the 120 members of the Knesset and everybody would do what a politician never does — candidly say what he really believes in — you have in this Knesset a dovish majority. I have absolutely no doubt about it and I know all the 120 people quite well. There is a majority of 60-70 out of the 120 who ordinarily you would call doves. But they are dominated by a political structure which is commanded today by Begin. If you had an equally strong leadership by somebody else you wouldn't need new elections in Israel to have a different kind of government. □