

## IPI MEETS THE MIDDLE EAST PEACE-MAKERS

# 'It will not be an easy journey'

JOHN DOWNING, editor of the *Toronto Sun* and head of the IPI's Canadian committee, relives an extraordinarily timely conference

**J**ERUSALEM: Timing is as important in news as location is in real estate. And for participants in the international seminar entitled "The Media and the Peace Process," we were in the right place at the right time.

We were in Jerusalem the week before that reluctant handshake on the White House lawn between Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat. We talked to all the key Israeli players while they were still trying to decide if there should *be* a handshake. A ring-side seat on a historic moment!

The International Press Institute has prided itself on the timing and location of its meetings – from Berlin the year the Wall fell, to Cape Town in 1994, just before the crucial South African elections. But this seminar – arranged by the IPI and the Israel Council on Foreign Relations – seemed so prescient, that participants and speakers kept remarking on the fact.

We were about 25 in number, largely from Europe with a North American seasoning. It was hard to tell, since our speakers were so newsworthy: observers kept dropping in from the foreign and local press.

Indeed, our first speaker, Uri Savir, director-general of the Israeli Foreign Ministry – the man who initialled the final deal in a secret meeting in Paris – had to speak to a fully-fledged press conference because he was such "hot" news.

And our last speaker never made it to the hotel from the office of the Foreign Ministry, because tens of thousands choked our area of Jerusalem and its traffic in a demonstration watched around the world.

Much of what the speakers had to say has not become dated, because they urged the "long" view

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*The IPI Director, Johann Fritz (left), with the Israeli Prime Minister, Yitzhak Rabin, just days before Mr Rabin shook hands with the PLO leader, Yasser Arafat*

on us: that this was not the end of a process, but rather the beginning. Many details were not known as you read these lines, because of the negotiations which must take place after agreements on principles have been signed. One value of the IPI seminar was the emphasis placed on this: the background that peace could not come to the Middle East like some dove swooping down one morning.

Mr Savir said that the deal was inevitable, because the Israelis and the Palestinians had to deal with each other: "We have a common destiny," and even had common enemies in poverty and radical fundamentalism. He said that the agreement had not happened because "we have become Romeo and Juliet," a metaphor which he quickly realised was unfortunate

*Continued next page*

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*From previous page*

due to the deaths of those two lovers.

In fact, Mr Savir was most comfortable with imagery about paths and roads: "It will not be an easy journey, but we have to embark on it." It seems that all Israel started to talk that way, from the Prime Minister, Mr Rabin, to the diplomat, who said: "We've turned the corner, but we don't know in which direction."

Perhaps the most entertaining and candid of the speakers was also the most eminent: Ezer Weizman, the President of the State of Israel. The seminar kept us busy from dawn to dusk, so Mr Weizman and his musings about the future of his beloved country took the place of breakfast for many of us.

Mr Weizman is a decorated fighter-pilot in several wars, one of the founders of the Israeli Air Force and an architect of the strategy the Israelis used in the 1967 Six-Day War to smash the enemy on the ground. What this Mr Weizman had for us was words of wisdom, and some humour too, since he admitted that his adrenalin was still flowing from warming up his 1944 Spitfire the day before.

## *Perspective*

The President provided us with some nostalgia about both his nation and his wars, to give us a perspective on the fears of the opposition Likud Party – and all those demonstrators in the streets – that a peace pact with the Palestine Liberation Organisation would leave Israel vulnerable to a "terrorist outfit."

"It's unfortunate that Jews are still so insecure," said Mr Weizman. "I have experience in making peace, and the terribly clever thing is that it's easier to make war than peace."

He had no time for Army leaders worrying publicly about the security of the state being affected. "I'm a former deputy chief of the defence staff, and I say they should shut up. They're under the Government."

The old warrior then wove for us an elaborate metaphor: the accord with the PLO, he said, could be compared with breaking through a fortified point in battle. "It's just a start. After you break down the wire and deal with a few mines, you have to do a lot more. Well, we've just broken through the barbed wire."

He said that the rest of an Army always watched to see whether the breakthrough could be maintained. Because if the main Army



*David Kuttab (far left), a columnist for Al Quds: "Our experience with the Arab world has been a bitter one. They gave us lip-service, mainly." And (right) Radwan Abu-Ayyash, director of the Arab Centre, who, like Mr Kuttab, called the breakthrough stunning but warned: "Peace is not a treaty; it's education, changing people's attitudes"*

ran into trouble, if the breakthrough was not forceful enough, the flanks started to worry about getting into trouble.

Mr Weizman, like others, remarked on "how lucky you are to be here now: in the 14th year of peace with Egypt, in the fifth year of the *intifada*, we have reached the beginning of the end of the process."

The President reminded us that, "with all due respect to the PLO, Syria is the main concern. You know, the Syrian leader, Assad, is very foxy. No, he acts like an old lion, still with teeth. That's what his name means in Hebrew."

It was unfortunate – but understandable – that our session with the Israeli Prime Minister, Mr Rabin, was for background purposes only. An obviously tired leader gave us a lengthy lecture on precisely what was happening. He talked more than we questioned. Since he still faced the debate and votes of his Cabinet and the Knesset within a week, there were valid

reasons why his responses to our questions were phrased so that none of us would blow his "Gaza/Jericho First" deal by leaking any comments.

Only a few hours later, the Opposition leader, Benjamin ("Bibi") Netanyahu, made a passionate, on-the-record attack on the deal, in the style which has made him the darling of television audiences throughout the world.

The contrast between the two leaders was the difference between

night and day. Mr Netanyahu was like a lion on the hunt; Mr Rabin was as stately and careful as if tip-toeing through a mine-field.

The foundation of the opposition's case was that the Government had not been elected to do this. He openly admitted that his strategy had been that an election did not have to be held before November 1996, but he said that he now wanted one before this peace deal could be hardened into something irreversible.

Mr Netanyahu complained – and this is always an issue of concern to the IPI – that it had been difficult for him to get enough time on Israeli radio and television, even though the polls clearly indicated that there was a great split over the impact of the agreement. He said that he could make his argument more easily on CNN and "Nightline."

Geography and defence intermingle in Israel. Land for living

*Continued next page*

# IPI MEETS THE MIDDLE EAST PEACE-MAKERS

*From previous page*

on is important, but so is land as a buffer and early-warning zone in war. Mr Netanyahu stressed this point by saying that, from a ridge easily seen from the roof of the Knesset, "just above us, a terrorist could fire on us and retreat, and it would be up to Arafat to discipline him, because that would be his territory. The punishment wouldn't be likely."

Mr Netanyahu added: "You know exactly where this is going, and so does anyone conversant with the Middle East. This deal ends in a Palestinian state, yet many people here think it's just Gaza and Jericho."

The Likud leader continued: "Everyone wants to believe that this leopard has changed his spots. Yet there is no government in the world that will hand the high land above its cities to Arafat."

Mr Netanyahu used the same words as the Government: this was the start of a long process. "Let the people decide," he said. "This is the most monumental decision in our history since Zionism and the establishment of the Jewish state."

One value of this seminar was that the participants did not listen to "suits" – a new North American expression for the formal bureaucratic and political side of an issue. We listened to Israeli and Palestinian journalists as well.

David Kuttab, a columnist for *Al Quds* – the largest Arabic-language daily in the occupied territories – described the peace talks in Washington (before the breakthrough in Norway) as "almost a charade." He had had a front-row seat as media adviser to the Palestinian delegation.

For Radwan Abu-Ayyash, director of the Arab Media Centre and a key adviser to the Palestinians, the talks which had begun two years earlier in Madrid were nothing more than an elaborate game of bureaucratic ping-pong.

For both men, the breakthrough was stunning. "We're like cheating husbands," said Mr Abu-Ayyash, "but we like this cheat."

Nevertheless, he also had words

of warning: "This breakthrough is a start. Don't dream rosy. Peace is not a treaty; it's education, changing people's attitudes, how people think, our mothers, our fathers, our children. We even have to change the books ..."

For Mr Kuttab, who had been delayed at the airport welcoming a cousin back from being expelled, the joy was heightened by the fact that "Palestinians made it on their own. No Arab country can say to the Palestinians: 'You owe us.' Our experience with the Arab world has been a bitter one. They gave us lip-service, mainly. They said that 200 million Arabs were behind us, but it wasn't really true."

This panel got along much better than one between David Bar-Ilan,

*‘What exactly would we see when the darkness of war was lifted from the cradle of religion?’*

a famous pianist who is now editor of the *Jerusalem Post*, and Hirsh Goodman, chief editor of the magazine, the *Jerusalem Report*.

It seemed that Mr Bar-Ilan and Mr Goodman were about to come to blows, as they continued their debate outside the conference room. Inside, the audience contented themselves with taking verbal shots at Mr Bar-Ilan, suggesting, for example, that he return to the piano, after he was acidly critical of foreign news coverage of the Israeli side of the *intifada*.

At dinner an hour or so later, we had far gentler diplomacy from Mohammed Bassiouny, the Egyptian Ambassador to Israel, who spoke about the peace talks from the viewpoint of a country which had led the way, and had had a leader assassinated for his courage and initiative.

The seminar concluded, not with the wine and food and opulent hotels of a post-General Assembly IPI tour, but with a tour up through the desert to the Golan Heights. This provided us with an opportunity to meet the settlers, the people who would be affected by the peace agreement, and to see the military, who had to protect the borders, no matter what happened.

We visited an Israeli military post overlooking Quneitra, an abandoned Syrian regional centre just over the demilitarised buffer-zone monitored by Canadian and Finnish troops. In addition to the visit and some excellent food, we got an insight into just how closely the Israelis live with their military.

A visit to a kibbutz on the Golan Heights overlooking the Sea of Galilee – a kibbutz literally on an old Syrian military camp – was the setting for three articulate Israelis to argue passionately about being displaced by peace.

Marla Van Metu, who arrived in the Golan Heights 10 years ago from the United States, declared: "People are displaced by war, not peace. If it's truly a peace, none of us should have to move. We feel peace doesn't have to mean land."

They all talked of the bad old days, of the daily shelling from Syrian guns of the fields of the Israelis, just below on the banks of the Galilee.

Joel Sheinfeld has lived in the kibbutz for the past 20 years, and described how it had been built out of rubble and Army barracks. He spoke of how close Syria was, how peace and trade could bring prosperity to both sides of the buffer zone. He said that the Syrians were welcome to come to his area.

It was something for us to mull over, as the big bus rolled through the darkness back to Jerusalem. All around us was black, but lights sparkled continually in Jordan across the tiniest river with the biggest reputation in the world. What exactly would we see when the darkness of war was lifted from the cradle of religion?

JOHN DOWNING