



1980's:

- Defense Minister
- Israeli Society from Lebanon to Intifada

Overview

Yitzhak Rabin served as Defense Minister in the National Unity government from 1984 – 1988 under both Prime Ministers Shimon Peres (1984-86) and Yitzhak Shamir (1986-88). During this time, Rabin withdrew the IDF from Lebanon up to the security zone and was responsible for the strong-handed policy against the Intifada, the Palestinian uprising against Israeli rule. While Rabin believed it was necessary to include a diplomatic-political framework in finding the solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, he was at first unwilling to acknowledge the Palestinian violence as a legitimate means for achieving political goals and refused to negotiate a settlement without a cessation of violence. After years of violent fighting at the borders, the Palestinians did not deter and Rabin began to realize the issues could only be solved across the negotiating table.

Defense Minister

Lebanon and the Security Zone

The 1984 Knesset elections took place with two serious crises hovering in the background: the war in Lebanon, which had begun in 1982, and the serious economic crisis with unchecked soaring inflation. The elections ended in a draw between the two main political camps. The outcome was the formation of a national unity government, in which Yitzhak Rabin was defense minister.

Since 1982 the IDF was suffering heavy losses in Lebanon and one of Rabin's urgent tasks was to end Israel's painful involvement there. A plan was adopted in 1985 to withdraw IDF forces from Lebanon up to the security zone, a narrow strip of Lebanese territory close to the international border with Israel.

Rabin also had to contend with the Intifada, the Palestinian uprising against Israeli rule in the territories, which broke out in December 1987. The Intifada was a broad-based group and their attacks included the use of primitive weapons as well as general commercial strikes. IDF soldiers and the Israeli government confronted new challenges in trying to quell the Palestinian uprising. The armed struggle in the territories, in which women and children also took part, raised several strategic and ethical issues. For instance, the proper degree of force with which the IDF should respond when civilian residents throw stones or firebombs at the troops.

During his tenure as Defense Minister, Rabin also decided to suspend production of the Lavi, a highly sophisticated jet fighter that was not yet in the manufacturing stage.

Emergence of the Palestinian Opposition

The uprising began on December 7, 1987 when four Palestinians were killed when an Israeli truck crashed into their car. This isolated incident was merely the match that lit a fire that and ignited deep rooted emotions on both sides. Masses of Palestinians – men, women and children – took part. In Tunis, Senior PLO officials were taken by as much surprise with the outbreak of riots as was Israel, and it took a while for the PLO to assume responsibility for directing and organizing the struggle.

Like most of Israel's political and military leaders, Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin did not believe that the violent riots would go on for long, and set out on a lengthy visit to the United States two days after the rioting began. When it became clear that the Intifada was a long-term affair, Rabin modified his policy on the Palestinian struggle. While he believed that a solution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict had to include a diplomatic-political dimension within the framework of any sort of future peace settlement, he was loath to acknowledge violence as a legitimate means of achieving political goals and was unwilling to negotiate on a settlement without a cessation of the violence. In order to ensure the security of Israel's citizens and to make it clear to the Palestinians that they would pay a heavy price for their uprising, Rabin sought to impose order and crush the violent opposition with a firm hand. "In any clash with rioters, they have to emerge injured, with scars; they have to know that people will not only be arrested, but that they will have casualties, as well. That is my policy, and I am responsible for it."

Failure of the Military Response

The Intifada confronted the IDF with a new set of challenges. The uprising of women and children fighting professional soldiers required a completely different set of tactical responses than those which conscripted soldiers were accustomed to. In addition, the armed opposition took place within the cities and villages where hundreds of thousands of Palestinian residents lived, which raised tough ethical questions about using force against a civilian population. As such, the IDF was limited in its ability to use heavy weapons, such as bombs launched from the air. Soldiers were forced to engage in extensive hand-to-hand combat in alleys and houses and had to contend with. The IDF was interested in avoiding the deaths of as many residents as possible. The line attributed to Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin (although there is no proof he in fact said it) that Israel should "break their hands and feet," was an expression of the desire to respond with a firm hand against the rioters, but without loss of life.

The violence employed by the army did not deter the Palestinians, who continued to throw rocks and firebombs. After about three years, the Intifada changed in character, from a popular, broad-based uprising to committing acts of terrorism carried out by small groups. It was a gloomy reality that a large, strong and well-trained army such as the IDF was helpless in the face of a mob that would not budge. Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin understood that a new way had to be found to contend with the violent form of Palestinians protest.

Seeking the Other Option

Rabin began to understand that the rigid line adopted by the IDF was not deterring the Palestinians and began to believe that the Palestinian problem could only be resolved across the negotiating table. Over 20 years after the territories were occupied under his command, Rabin realized the great evil spawned by the occupation and from ruling over more than a

million Palestinians. Yitzhak Rabin then sought to bring about the end of the occupation through political means.

Israeli Society from Lebanon to Intifada

The Public Dispute over the Lebanon War

The Lebanon War began on June 6, 1982. The war was initiated by the IDF, and aimed to create a “security zone” that would protect the settlements and cities of the Galilee from terrorists based in South Lebanon; rid Lebanon of the PLO and the Syrian army; and install a new pro-Israel administration. Based on the initial government consensus, it seemed the war would be of limited scale. However, the war escalated to intensify the Israeli army’s hold on the territory of Lebanon up to and including Beirut in accordance with Defense Minister Ariel Sharon’s plan. Terror activities against Israel grew more frequent, and the number of casualties mounted.

The Lebanon War was conceived by many in the Israeli public, primarily those on the left side of the political map, as a war of choice; a war that the need for and morality of were highly in doubt. It generated widespread civil protest in Israel, especially after the Christian militia forces, known as the Phalangists, carried out a massacre of Palestinian residents of the Sabra and Shetila refugee camps, which were adjacent to areas under IDF control. The most significant leftist expression against the IDF for the massacre of hundreds of Palestinians was a demonstration at Malchei Israel Square in Tel Aviv (renamed Rabin Square) in which approximately 400,000 demonstrators took part. This demonstration and the actions Defense Minister, Ariel Sharon, and the Chief of Staff, Rafael Eitan, during the course of the war paved the way for the formation of a state commission of inquiry, the Kahane Commission.

The broad-based civil protest, which continued even after the appointment of the commission, signified the collapse of the consensus on Israel’s military operations, which had existed in Israeli society ever since the state’s establishment. This loss of consensus was exacerbated further after the Intifada broke out in 1987.

The Public Debate on How to Contend with the Intifada

The Intifada led to an exacerbation of the conflict over the political map of Israeli society. The bulk of the conflict pertained to the question of the territorial boundaries of Israel. Additional disputes derived from this issue on questions such as the right of settlement in the territories, the measure of autonomy to be given to Palestinian residents of the territories, and the degree of legitimacy of using IDF force against an uprising population.

The political polarization that had already existed between right and left grew sharper still, as the two camps realized that it was not possible to restore the status quo in the territories to its previous state. On the left side of the political map, there was a common assumption that, even if the military actions were critical for ensuring security, the overall solution to the situation that had developed was not military but diplomatic in nature and would require significant dialogue with the Palestinians. Similarly, the left wing camp began to legitimize the establishment of a Palestinian state alongside Israel. Some voices on the right were calling for a solution that would use more forceful means, although other elements in the

right also began to favor a diplomatic solution. The widespread activities of the extra parliamentary protest movements, both on right and on left, were a reflection of the dispute.

Meanwhile, the IDF found itself in the eye of the political storm. At a time when some elements of the left alleged that the army was adopting too firm of a policy against the uprising; and, that there were numerous violations of the opening fire orders, the settlers were feeling that the IDF was not protecting them properly and that the political ranks were not allowing it to wipe out the uprising.