



PERSPECTIVES

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Revisiting Walter Eytan's *The First Ten Years*

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The diplomatic history of Israel as related by Dr. Walter Eytan, the first director general of the Israeli Foreign Ministry and the founding father of the Israeli diplomatic service, provides an intimate insight into Israel's political and international struggle for survival. Sixty years after publication of Eytan's book, his vision and legacy remain valid and warrant renewed attention.

A forgotten book by one of the most prominent of all Israeli diplomats deserves a renewed look, notwithstanding the passage of time.

The First Ten Years: A Diplomatic History of Israel is the personal testimony of Dr. Walter Eytan, the first director general of the Israeli Foreign Ministry (from 1948 to 1959). Eytan, who headed the ministry during the tough days of the War of Independence, is considered the founding father of the Israeli diplomatic service.

The book was published in 1958 by Simon and Schuster in New York, and was never translated into Hebrew. It is a historical treasure in that it gives the reader a unique, behind-the-scenes look at diplomatic decision-making from the inside.

Walter Eytan's reputation derives primarily from his pivotal role as head of the Israeli delegation to Rhodes in January 1949, where he helped pave the way for armistice agreements with the Arab states. This was followed by the Lausanne Conference (April 1949), sponsored by the UN PCC (Palestine Conciliation Commission), which aimed at finding a peaceful solution to the Israeli-Arab conflict. His professional authority was manifested on several occasions during those negotiations, as well as during interactions with Israeli PM David Ben-Gurion and FM Moshe Sharett.

Eytan's assertions remain valid today, bearing in mind the never-ending conflict with the Palestinian Arabs. He clearly identified the refugee issue as the core obstacle to any Israeli-Arab breakthrough, emphasizing that "the Arabs insisted throughout that no general peace negotiations could be undertaken until the refugee question was settled. Israel was willing to discuss the refugee question but felt it could be solved only within the framework of a general settlement." On this matter he was unequivocal:

The Arab states not only had no interest in the repatriation or resettlement of the refugees; their interest required that the refugees should not be repatriated or resettled at all, or at any rate not for a long time, certainly not until they had ceased to be of political use. They pressed for the refugees' repatriation to Israel only because they knew this was not feasible in any case, at least not on any considerable scale.

Israel carried into effect a "reunion of families" scheme, undertook to pay compensation for abandoned Arab lands, agreed to the return of 100,000 refugees, released "frozen" Arab bank accounts, resettled some 35,000 refugees inside Israeli territory, and offered Jordan a free zone in Haifa Port. Not a single conciliatory move came from the Arab side.

Eytan observed that the Arab states enjoyed a remarkable political achievement by managing to quickly harness the world's sympathy for the refugees to their own political ends. The Arab national cause as a whole became the beneficiary of sympathy that had been intended for the refugees alone. The Arab states succeeded at this by making the world believe it was Israel that was responsible for the refugees' status as such, and for their remaining refugees ever since. Eytan called the refugees "a gift to Arab propaganda," which turned them into Israel's gravest political liability during the first decade of its existence.

Regrettably, for all its efforts, Israel has never been able to free itself from the reproach leveled at it by the Arab propaganda machine. It remains tarnished by the charge that it drove the refugees out and has since cruelly denied them the elementary human right of "returning home," and in doing so "defied" the UN.

Eytan was deeply critical of the world's standpoint vis-à-vis the Arabs' hostility towards Israel. In his words:

The Arab campaign against Israel has been conducted on every front for the past ten years with a vigor and fixity of purpose that might have been devoted to a better cause. The very intransigence of Arab policy has daunted the world. Little effort has been made to curb it. ...Their [the Arabs'] whole attitude is based on the thesis that Israel has no right

to exist and that to negotiate with her is out of the question because it would mean conceding her this right.

He brilliantly observed the Arab world's manipulative policy, both externally and internally, while maintaining a state of near-war and tension versus Israel.

In his assessment,

[The Arab world] provided itself with a grievance it could nurse to its heart's content and in politics there are few assets more valuable than a grievance. It focused international attention on itself by becoming a power for mischief; and it reckoned that, like any group which made enough of a nuisance of itself, it might hope for the prizes of appeasement. ... [T]his hope would not be disappointed, and it felt encouraged to persist. Domestically, hostility to Israel promised rich rewards. There was nothing like a bitter harangue against Israel to rouse the masses and divert their minds from less appealing topics. The Arab League, as such, has been held together to this day largely by the boycott and other common actions against Israel. With the growing clash of interests between the Arab states themselves, the Arab League clings to Israel as its main *raison d'être*. It is not cynicism to say that if Israel did not exist, the Arabs would have to invent her.

Eytan's firm conviction, which the incumbent Israeli leadership would be wise to heed, is that "no country in its senses will make concessions before it negotiates, however willing it may be and Israel always was willing to make concessions to the other side in the course of negotiations. The Arabs were merely trying to create a good impression at times when it suited them, and to see whether they could wheedle some major concession out of Israel after the manner of the released bank accounts and the reunion of families without giving anything in return." He added, with a wink, that "Israel could, of course, appease the Arabs by crippling and ultimately liquidating herself, giving away a piece of territory here and some economic titbit there, until there was nothing left. But this is not a course that could commend itself to her or should commend itself to anyone else."

Eytan's central point was this: "As long as the Arab states are not willing to recognize Israel and Israel's right to exist, there can be no hope of peace, nor even of "settling outstanding problems."

With a visionary spirit, Eytan realized as long ago as 1957 that solving the refugee issue "must depend largely on the readiness and capacity of the United States." That's why it was essential to take advantage of the visit to the Middle East of Senator Hubert H. Humphrey, a member of the US Senate Committee

on Foreign Relations and future Vice President, in the spring of 1957, to consolidate the true facts. On his return home, Humphrey submitted a report that was a statement in defense of the Israeli standpoint. It included a firm assertion that “the only realistic basis for an effective American policy toward the Middle East” should be based upon the principle that “*resettlement in Arab lands*, with compensation for property left in Israel, is in fact the only effective and realistic way of solving the Arab refugee problem.” He concluded that repatriation was in any case no longer possible.

Humphrey appears to have been the first international figure to take into consideration the fate of Jewish refugees from Arab states, where “repressive measures have made their lives intolerable.” He praised Israel for accepting and settling around 900,000 Jewish refugees, concluding that “[I]t would be suicidal for Israel to admit a large group of immigrants whose whole indoctrination for the past 10 years has been one of hatred for the Jewish state.” Senator Humphrey concluded that “to do so would be to establish a fifth column” inside Israel.

It took more than 60 years, but at last a US president – Donald Trump – finally began to execute Eytan’s vision and Humphrey’s recommendations, starting with the elimination of US funding for UNRWA.

Dr. Walter Eytan, a member of the historical Mapai party and a senior civil servant under PM David Ben-Gurion, left a legacy of guidelines for new generations of Israeli diplomats. His emphasis was on the supreme obligation of insisting upon the vital interests of the state of Israel, and above all: never make concessions before negotiations.

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