

# MEI REMEMBERS

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## **Shimon Peres**

**(1923 – 2016)**

By

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**B**orn in Poland on 2 August 1923, Szymon Persk who later Hebraized his name as Shimon Peres was the leader of the pre-state Israeli leadership. After a brief illness following a stroke a couple weeks ago, he passed away on Wednesday in Tel Aviv.

Worldly wise and widely read, he donned various avatars as a kibbutznik, bureaucrat, trade union leader, senior official, dogged politician, skilled diplomat, senior minister, prime minister, president, elder statesperson and above a peace activist. He dominated the Israeli landscape for close to seven decades.

Immigrated to the then Mandate Palestine at the age of 11, he was part of social Zionism led by David Ben-Gurion and soon emerged as his trusted confidant and lieutenant. He joined the ministry of defense at 28 and was instrumental in some of the important strategic programmes of Israel including the Dimona nuclear reactor, Israel aircraft industry and played a critical role in the Sèvres Conference that paved the way for strategic cooperation with France on the eve of the Suez war of 1956.

### **A long innings at the Knesset**

In 1959, Peres entered the Knesset for the first time and remained its member until 2006 when he was elected president. During this period, he represented the Labor Party and its various avatars. Due to disagreements, he joined hands with his mentor Ben-Gurion and former general Moshe Dayan to form the Rafi for a short while before returning to the Labor Party. In later years, he joined hands with Ariel Sharon in forming the Kadima Party in 2005. And in June 2007 he was elected Israel's ninth president and retired in July 2014.

During his long political career, he presided over various ministries, including foreign affairs and defense. As finance minister in the Unity Government during 1988-90, he is credited with reducing the annual inflation that ran at 400 percent to a manageable 16 percent. Twice he held the office of prime minister; first time as part of the unity government during 1984-86 and then for a brief period after Rabin's assassination in November 1995. He narrowly lost to Likud leader Benjamin Netanyahu in the direct election for the prime minister held in May 1996.

### **The 'loser' politician**

Within the cut-throat Israeli domestic politics, he was often depicted as a "loser". During 1977 and 1996 he headed the Labor Party five times but never won an election outright. The party returned to power in 1992 and 1999 only after it replaced Rabin and Ehud Barak respectively as its leaders. He also lost a couple of leadership elections to the party, as well as for president in 2000.

However, unlike other Labor or leftwing leaders, Peres retained his never-say-die spirit, remained politically active and relevant until his very end. Electoral reversals never daunted the youth and his great sense of humor. Just before leaving the presidency, Peres performed in a video made by his granddaughter wherein he was trying to find post-retirement employment as plumber, kibbutz activist, postman, farm worker, security guard, cashier in supermarket, gas station worker and even pizza delivery boy. That was his spirit of life.

### **Reaching out to Palestine**

In the 1990s, Peres was the senior-most Israeli figure to recognize the need for a political settlement with the Palestinians after the end of the Cold War and Kuwait crisis. Even when formal negotiations with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) was a punishable crime, he courage political contacts with the PLO officials in Sweden and ushered in the Oslo process. He doggedly pushed for a negotiated settlement with Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat that culminated in the historic Clinton-Rabin-Arafat handshake in the White House Lawns on 13 September 1993. For his contribution, he shared the Nobel Peace Prize with Rabin and Arafat in 1994.

Soon Peres emerged as the principle trouble-shooter whenever the Oslo process faltered due to the upsurge of violence and periodically met Arafat as well as his successor Mahmoud Abbas. When the opposition Likud was in power, he ruffled a few feathers by his pro-peace, pro-negotiation and pro-withdrawal statements. This trend did not end when he became president and despite the ceremonial nature of the office — he continued to speak for a peace settlement with the Palestinians based on the two-state solution. He firmly argued that Israel's ability to remain its Jewish and democratic identities as per the dreams of its founding fathers rested on ending the occupation and withdrawing substantially from the occupied territories. Thus, he firmly backed the Gaza Disengagement plan implemented by Prime Minister Sharon in September 2005.

### **For peace in the region**

In the late 1970s Prime Minister Menachem Begin faced internal rebellion within his party over the Camp David Accords with Egypt and Peres was quick to rally behind the beleaguered leader and supported the first peace agreement with an Arab country. The Likud did not reciprocate this favor and the Rabin-Peres government was pursuing the Oslo process in the 1990s. On the contrary, the rightwing opposition was partly responsible for the eventual collapse of the peace process with the Palestinians.

In the wake of the post-Oslo euphoria, Peres visualized a New Middle East and rather than sharing the limited resources, he wanted to expand the opportunities and resources, especially water, through technological innovation, regional partnership, and innovative cooperation. Toward this end in 1996 he founded the Peres Center for Peace towards socio-economic cooperation and development and people-to-people contacts in West Asia.

In the post-Oslo regional climate, he reached out to various international figures and countries and befriended them. At times, he was able to reduce the friction between Prime Minister Netanyahu and international leaders. Peres played a critical role in minimizing the Likud leader's tense relations with US President Barack Obama over the Iranian nuclear controversy.

### **The India connect**

As prime minister, Peres briefly met Rajiv Gandhi on the sidelines of the UN sessions in September 1985 and this was one of the first contacts between the leaders of both the countries. This exchange eventually culminated in the normalization of relations in January 1992. Shortly later Peres visited India as foreign minister and came back for more visits. His last visit was in November 2014 shortly he relinquished the presidency. Not visiting India as president was one of his unfulfilled dreams.

From someone who built Israel's strategic deterrence, Peres transformed into a committed peace activist through the Oslo process. He was not only the last Israeli leader of the pre-state era but also a towering and committed peace activist in the region. With both leadership and foresight becoming a rare phenomenon in the region facing a host of threats from extremism and violence, Peres' death is an irreparable damage.

**Note:** This obituary was published in *The Hindustan Times* on 28 September 2016 and is reproduced with the permission of the author. Web Link: <http://www.hindustantimes.com/analysis/shimon-peres-from-building-israel-s-defence-to-peace-with-palestine/story-KtfrX0DiNYu63FTMOy8L8O.html>

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