

4 Israeli Ex-Security Chiefs Denounce Sharon's Hard Line, NY Times, November 15, 2003

By GREG MYRE

JERUSALEM, Nov. 14 — In a joint interview published Friday, four former heads of the Shin Bet security service delivered a blistering collective criticism of Israel's tough military policies toward the Palestinians, saying Israel urgently needed a political solution to the Middle East conflict.

"We are taking sure, steady steps to a place where the state of Israel will no longer be a democracy and a home for the Jewish people," said Ami Ayalon, the Shin Bet chief from 1996 to 2000.

Israel's largest circulation daily, Yediot Ahronot, splashed a huge front-page headline over the interview with the ex-chiefs of Shin Bet, or the General Security Service. "Four directors of G.S.S. warn: Israel in grave danger," read the headline above photos of the four, who ran the agency for nearly two decades. Interviewed, besides Mr. Ayalon, were Carmi Gilon, Yaakov Perry and Avraham Shalom.

The blunt critique of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's policies was the latest in a series by security officials and soldiers, current and former, questioning Israel's strategy in its battle against the three-year-old Palestinian uprising. Last month, the army chief of staff, Lt. Gen. Moshe Yaalon, said the network of restrictions placed on the Palestinian population had proved counterproductive, breeding greater militancy.

Mr. Sharon, a former general, has relied heavily on the military, and has insisted that Palestinian violence cease before the two sides can restart negotiations toward a settlement. Granting concessions during the fighting would be "rewarding terrorism," he has often said.

A solid majority of Israelis has backed his aggressive military approach, according to polls. Mr. Sharon, Israel's most prominent hawk, has won two landslide elections, in March 2001 and in January of this year. But the army has not been able to halt attacks, prompting some calls for a greater emphasis on diplomacy. Mr. Sharon is currently considering whether to hold talks with the recently installed Palestinian prime minister, Ahmed Qurei.

The former security chiefs said the government was focused almost entirely on military solutions, at the expense of finding ways to reach a permanent peace deal.

"It is dealing solely with the question of how to prevent the next terrorist attack," said Mr. Gilon, the Shin Bet chief during the mid-1990's, in the interview. Israeli leaders are not addressing "the question of how we get out of the mess we find ourselves in today."

The former security chiefs hold no important posts at present. But their views are generally respected, based on their years of firsthand experience in dealing with Palestinians, in particular the militant groups.

Mr. Sharon's government did not respond to the criticism. But a former Israeli president, Ezer Weizman, told Israeli television: "This really makes me furious. We have a country that is in a very delicate situation."

Mr. Ayalon is the only one of the four men who has sought to maintain a high public profile recently. He joined forces with a leading Palestinian moderate, Sari Nusseibeh, to campaign for a swift resumption of negotiations with the aim of reaching a permanent peace deal and creating a Palestinian state.

"Many Israelis thought we could defeat the Palestinians by military means, and this would solve our problems," Mr. Ayalon said Friday in a separate interview. "But this hasn't worked. Our economy is deteriorating and we have to change directions."

The former security chiefs also said that peace plans calling for gradual steps were likely to fail. Neither the Israelis nor the Palestinians are prepared to take a major risk that could break the current stalemate unless they can expect a major reward, they said.

The Palestinian leadership is unlikely to crack down on violent factions, risking a civil war, without a guarantee that a viable Palestinian state will emerge, Mr. Ayalon said. In turn, he said, Israel was unlikely to uproot settlements in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip unless it believed that the Palestinians were sincere about ending the conflict.

The former Shin Bet chiefs also said that any peace deal would require Israel to abandon most of its nearly 150 settlements, where about 230,000 Jewish settlers live in the West Bank and Gaza.

Mr. Sharon "has spoken often about the need for painful compromises, and there are no painful compromises except the evacuation of settlements," said Mr. Perry, the Shin Bet chief from 1988 to 1995.

On the Palestinian side, many acknowledge that the uprising has brought mostly misery. But public criticism is rarely directed at the Palestinian leader, Yasir Arafat, who has jailed his more vocal critics in the past.

Among Israelis, criticism of government policies has arisen in some surprising quarters recently.

In addition to the critique offered by General Yaalon, 27 reserve pilots in the Israeli Air Force earlier signed a letter saying they opposed airstrikes that targeted militants in heavily populated civilian areas, and that often caused civilian casualties.

Meanwhile, several hundred Israeli reserve soldiers have signed a petition saying they will refuse to serve in the West Bank and Gaza, with some going to jail.

Israeli and Palestinian politicians announced last month that they had worked out an unofficial peace deal, known as the Geneva Accord, which they offered as a blueprint for formal negotiations. The Israeli delegation was made up of liberals very much at odds with Mr. Sharon, while the Palestinian side included a number of negotiators who had worked closely with Mr. Arafat.

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