



January, 2008

Interview with Arnan 'Sini' Azaryahu by Avner Cohen

Citation:

"Interview with Arnan 'Sini' Azaryahu by Avner Cohen," January, 2008, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, From the personal collection of Avner Cohen.

<http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/117848>

Summary:

Transcript of interview by Avner Cohen with long-term Israeli government insider Arnan "Sini" Azaryahu, who served as a trusted aide and confidant to Minister Yisrael Galili, a close ally and advisor to Israeli prime minister Gold Meir. In this interview, Sini recounts a tense meeting held in Meir's office during the height of the 1973 Yom Kippur war, when Meir overruled a request from Defense Minister Moshe Dayan to prepare Israel's nuclear arsenal for a demonstration blast.

Credits:

This document was made possible with support from the Leon Levy Foundation and Carnegie Corporation.

Original Language:

Hebrew

Contents:

- English Translation

Interview with Arnan Azaryahu (“Sini”)^[1]

The interview was conducted in early 2008 at his home in Kibbutz Yiron in the Upper Galilee, Israel, about a year prior to his death in November 2008.

Yiron, Israel

Interviewer: Dr. Avner Cohen

Sini: In the [second day of the] war of ‘73, when the situation in the Golan [Heights] ^[2] was unclear and tense, Yisrael [Galili]^[3] came to the office. We started talking and he asked me to come to eat with him. He liked to talk about his thoughts when he ate, so I said ok. As we prepared to leave, he got a telephone call from [Prime Minister] Golda [Meir],^[4] who asked him [Galili] to stop by her office for a five minute [consultation]. Our office was about 200 meters from her [the prime minister’s office]. Yisrael told me, “Come with me. It will take only five minutes. Instead of waiting here, wait for me over there, and we will go [to eat] from Golda’s office. I don’t want to waste time, and I don’t want to come back here.” Ok . . . So we went to the [prime minister’s] building. There was a long corridor inside, a few benches, and the entrance to Golda’s office. He went inside the office and I stayed in the corridor. I waited for five minutes...

Cohen: This wasn’t a cabinet meeting?

Sini: No, no. He said, “Golda wants me for a five minute consultation.” She didn’t say on the phone how many people will be in the meeting and so forth . . . I was waiting, and five minutes passed, ten minutes, twenty minutes, half hour . . . There was no sign of Yisrael. After waiting there for about forty minutes, I saw Shalheveth Freier,^[5] who was a good friend of mine, coming towards me from the other side of the corridor. He walked in my direction and [as he noticed me he] stopped at a distance. Instead of saying hello as usual, he sat on a bench that was far from me. I was a little puzzled by that. Shalheveth and I were good friends, and we always talked and were happy to see each other. But then, when he noticed me, he stopped and didn’t . . . I didn’t say anything. So he sat about four benches away from me, and we were both sitting and waiting. I think that it [was] three quarter of an hour later . . . The door finally opened and Yisrael [Galili] stepped outside. The office door was right in front of my bench. He [Yisrael] started walking towards me. In the middle of the corridor he glanced to the side and noticed Shalheveth sitting there. Yisrael then [stopped and] said to me, “Sini, wait a minute... I forgot something in the office.” He turned back and walked back into Golda’s office again. He was there for about two minutes and then he came out again. Then he [Yisrael] [said], “Hold on, wait a minute.” We stood there in the corridor, and then Golda’s [senior] military secretary [aide] came out to the corridor . . . what was this guy’s name?

Cohen: Yisrael Lior.^[6]

Sini: Yisrael Lior . . . Lior asked Shalheveth to enter the office. And then Yisrael said to me, “Sini, now we can leave.” We started walking . . . [Yisrael said], “Right now I’m starving; I don’t want to talk about anything. Let’s eat first.” I sat there silently. I may have been a little impatient, but I didn’t say anything until we finished the steaks and all of that. Then he told me, “Listen, something like that has never happened to me before.” Then he started telling me why the meeting took [much] longer than five minutes to... Apparently there was bad news from the Golan [Heights] [saying] that the Syrians were advancing and we couldn’t stop them... In the meeting there were [Prime Minister] Golda [Meir], [Deputy Prime Minister] Yigal [Alon],^[7] [Chief of Staff David Elazar] Dado,^[8] [Minister of Defense] Moshe Dayan,^[9] and [Minister Without Portfolio Yisrael] Galili.

[Discussion of other staff excised]

Sini: And then he [Galili] says that Dado briefed [them] about the situation . . . And then they

decided to send [Former Chief of Staff, Lt General Haim] Bar Lev^[10] to the [Northern Command]... Not to replace, but to support the . . . what was his name? He was the commander in the [Northern Command] who was in the PALMACH too...

Cohen: Chaka, Maj. General Yitzhak Hofi. ^[11]

Sini: Chaka, yes. Since Chaka and Bar Lev were friends they did not worry [about offending Chaka]. There was a bad feeling [about what was happening in the Golan Heights] but . . . So then he [Galili] said that we argued about Bar Lev's appointment, [because he was] a government minister and [legally] he would have to resign^[12] . . . All sorts of things. Towards the end, [as] new reports [arrived saying] that the situation [in the front] is bad, Dado got a phone call from the "pit"^[13] and they asked him to come. There was some news from the Golan—bad news. [After Dado left], they [stayed], but they were all ready to adjourn. Then, Moshe Dayan came up to the door, put his hand on the door handle, and said, "Yes, I forgot something important. I thought that since the situation [in the Golan] is deteriorating, [as] we just heard [from] Dado . . . it is worthwhile, since we don't have much time and not many alternatives [to make the necessary technical preparations], that we should also prepare a nuclear option for demonstration." "Therefore," he continued, "In order for us not to waste time, I decided prior to my arrival here to invite Shalheveth Freier. He is waiting outside, and if you [Golda Meir] authorize him to start making the necessary preparations so that if we have to make a decision to activate, we could do it in a few minutes, rather than wandering around for half a day in order to prepare everything."

[Interview interrupted, interview resumes with brief recap of the previous discussion to ensure that no content was lost.]

Sini: So, Moshe Dayan says that in order to save a few hours of preparation, since we may be running out of time . . .

Cohen: [excised]

Sini: He [Dayan] waited for Dado to leave . . . He could have said it in the beginning of the meeting, but he waited until the end, until Dado already left . . . Dayan wanted to trivialize the issue . . . Since it was raised at the very end of the meeting as everyone is about to leave^[14] . . . [as if] these were only [technical] preparations for the sake of readiness. We weren't doing anything.

Cohen: [Unclear] Maybe it was a political issue, not a military issue, and these people . . .

Sini: No, it had nothing to do with that. [Dayan simply] thought that Dado would perhaps have opposed it. It was for him best to present it as a minor [technical] issue, and not dramatize anything because that would cause problems. [But] then Yigal [Alon] and Yisrael [Galili] flared up.

Cohen: Just a second. So Dayan suggested that we start making preparations . . .

Sini: No. He [Dayan] said, "I brought him [Freier] so that you [Meir] would call him in order to give him an order to prepare." He [Galili] understood that [the order was] supposed to be issued by both of them.^[15] It appeared as if Dayan wanted [or may already have] given him the order, [but maybe] he didn't... It was not [totally] clear [whether he had given him the order or not] . . . So Galili and Yigal stood up in full opposition to the [matter]. They said that we could stop [the Syrian army] and hold our ground. They said that our reserve units were still on the way to the Golan, and that once they will get there the balance of forces will change very rapidly [in our favor] . . . [They said] that we shouldn't panic, and if we did it [prepare, and then use nuclear weapons] it will be the end of the whole thing.^[16] After she heard them, Golda endorsed their position and she told Moshe Dayan, "Forget it."

Cohen: She said that in these very words?

Sini: Yes [excised].

Cohen: To Dayan?

Sini: Yes. Galili also told him to forget about it, [saying that] we will fight with conventional weapons without involving any other means, directly or indirectly. Galili told me that he noticed that he [Dayan] was leaning casually against the door throughout the episode, as if it was just a [common] friendly conversation . . . [Then Dayan] said, "OK, if this is what you say, [this is your responsibility] I accept."^[17] [Dayan left], but [it was evident] that he wasn't convinced. He said so explicitly. But if Golda is taking responsibility . . . [unclear] . . . He didn't say that he would tell Shalheveth something [to forget about it]. And then the meeting ended, and he [Dayan] left through another door . . . The corridor had many doors to all directions. And then Galili came out and noticed Shalheveth, and he told me, "I was afraid that he [Dayan] won't tell him [Shalheveth about the prime minister's decision], so I came back and told Yisrael Lior, 'Listen, Moshe Dayan may forget to tell Shalheveth not to do it. You should call Shalheveth and make Golda tell him in plain and simple Hebrew to forget about it.'" This is why he [Galili] didn't go to eat before Shalheveth was called [into the office]. He knew that Golda would tell him no, so he was calm. Moshe Dayan could have forgotten to tell Shalheveth that, for the time being, it [preparations of nuclear weapons] wasn't wanted.

^[1] This transcript has been edited lightly for readability and annotated for convenience. It is part of a longer interview conducted by Avner Cohen. Small sections have been excised to protect confidential sources and personal information. These excisions are explicitly marked in the text.

^[2] The Golan Heights is an area to the north west of Israel. It has been occupied by Israel since the end of the Six-Day War.

^[3] Yisrael Galili (1911-1986) was the leader of Achdut Ha'avoda party and served for decades in the Knesset and as a cabinet minister. He was known to be the closest minister to Prime Minister Golda Meir from 1969 to 1974.

^[4] Golda Meir (1898-1978) was Israel's fourth prime minister, in office from 1969 to 1974.

^[5] Shalheveth Freier (1920-1995) was one of Israel's nuclear pioneers. He was instrumental in the Dimona deal as Israel's science attaché in France from 1956 to 1960. In 1971, Prime Minister Golda Meir appointed him the director general of the Israel Atomic Energy Commission, a position he held until 1973. He resigned in 1976 over a major policy dispute (in fact, he was fired) whose details and context remain unknown.

^[6] Yisrael Lior (1921-1981) was military secretary under Prime Ministers Levi Eshkol and Golda Meir.

^[7] Yigal Alon (1918-1980) was the commander of the Palmach and a general in the IDF until his retirement from the military in 1950. He became an Israeli politician and a leader of the Labor Party.

^[8] David "Dado" Elazar was chief of staff of the IDF from 1972 to 1974, when he was forced to resign after the 1973 Yom Kippur War.

^[9] Moshe Dayan (1915-1981) was a noted Israeli military leader and politician, serving as the chief of staff to the Israeli Defense Forces from 1953 to 1958. He was minister of agriculture during Prime Minister Ben-Gurion's second term and minister of defense for Prime Minister Eshkol.

^[10] Haim Bar Lev (1924-1994) was an Israeli politician and diplomat, as well as chief of staff of the Israeli Defense Force from 1968 to 1971. In the war of 1973 Bar Lev rejoined the IDF to be an advisor for the commander of the Northern Command Yitzhak Hoffi. He then replaced the commander of the Southern Command and led the IDF in the Egyptian front.

^[11] Yitzhak Hofi (1927-) is a retired general of the IDF and former chief of Mossad, Israel's foreign intelligence organization, from 1974 until 1982. In the war of 1973, Hofi led the northern command.

^[12] There was concern that Bar Lev could not legally be government minister and serve in the armed forces simultaneously.

^[13] The “pit” refers to the IDF’s large underground command post.

^[14] One may interpret Dayan’s actions as reflecting two important aspects of the situation. First, the nuclear assets were entirely in civilian custodianship, via the prime minister and the head of the nuclear agency. They were not viewed as military assets, and as such were outside the domain of the chief of staff, David “Dado” Elazar. Second, Dayan wanted to highlight that his request was preliminary and technical and made to save precious time in case of a decision. It did not constitute the actual decision to demonstrate or to use nuclear weapons.

^[15] Sini is apparently alluding to then-current Israeli nuclear command and control procedures, under which both the prime minister and the minister of defense must jointly make decisions related to certain preparations for the use of nuclear assets.

^[16] By using the phrase “the whole thing” Sini seems to refer to the very rationale behind Israel’s nuclear program, as he and Allon understood it. They believed that the nuclear program only existed as a deterrent, and was never to be used militarily. In contrast, Dayan reportedly thought that nuclear weapons could be potentially available for battlefield use in the event of an extreme threat. This fundamental difference in views—which dated back at least 10 years, and was never formally resolved—explains the strong reaction that Dayan’s proposal elicited from Galili and Yigal Alon. For more information on the origins of the debate see *Israel and the Bomb* by Avner Cohen, chapter 12. The two sides also had very different views of the war itself. In the first few days of the war, Dayan believed that Israel was fast approaching a situation of existential threat; others, including Chief of staff Elazar, Ministers Galili and Allon, and ultimately also Prime Minister Golda Meir, thought that Dayan was in panic, and that his outlook was too pessimistic.

^[17] This response was typical for Dayan. In this, as well as a number of other issues, Dayan regularly accepted the prime minister’s decisions without argument.