

Yitzhak Rabin, a Tragic Figure

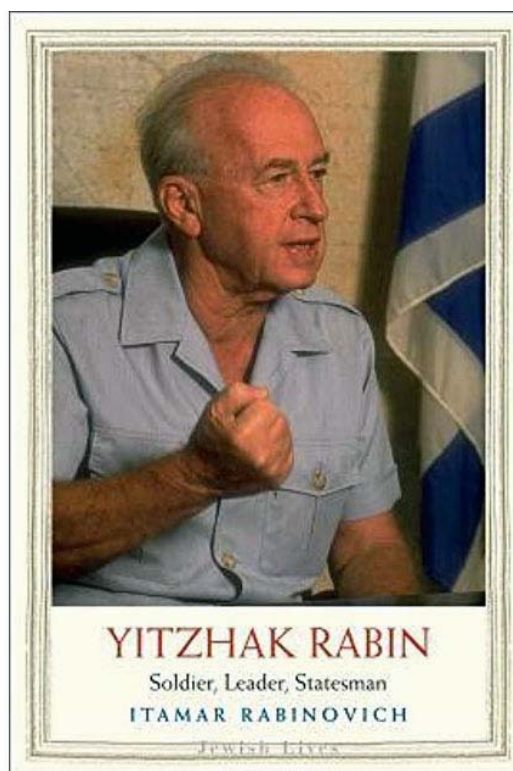
by Efraim Inbar

Yitzhak Rabin: Soldier, Leader, Statesman. By Itamar Rabinovich. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2017. 272 pp. \$25.

Yitzhak Rabin had a storied career as both a military man and a politician in Israel. He played crucial roles in the country's war of independence and the Six-Day War, going on to become its prime minister twice (1974-77 and 1992-95) until his assassination at a rally in Tel Aviv. Rabinovich has good credentials for this biography, having been appointed by Rabin as ambassador to the United States in 1992-96 and as chief negotiator with Syria beginning in 1993. He is also a prolific academic, writing regularly about the contemporary Middle East (primarily Syria), and has regularly interacted with Israel's Labor party elite. While he has produced a very readable rendering of Rabin's life, hardly any new historic material is presented here nor does the study help understand the statesman's complex personality.

On the plus side, Rabinovich disapproves of the attempt to portray Rabin as Mr. Peace instead of Mr. Security. He correctly describes Rabin as "a centrist leader preoccupied with Israel's security." Notwithstanding, this account is riddled with inaccuracies, a sizable number of which result from the author's biases.

Thus, Rabinovich writes that Rabin "ultimately rejected" a 1974 Jericho plan which would have allowed Jordan to take



over the West Bank town in exchange for a watered down non-belligerency pledge from Amman. Actually, it was King Hussein who delayed consideration of the plan until after the October 1974 Rabat Arab summit, which moved to recognize the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) as "the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people." This action undermined Jordan's legitimacy to reach a deal with Israel.

Likewise, the air force operation undertaken during the first hours of the 1967

war was named “Moked,” not “Kurnass.” The Rabat conference took place at the end of October 1974, not September-October. The largest protest rally in Israel was in 2000—against Ehud Barak’s plan to divide Jerusalem—and not against the government’s alleged responsibility for the Sabra and Shatila massacre perpetrated by the Christian militias in Lebanon.

The author betrays his political biases by criticizing Rabin for not making “bold” decisions or taking on more “diplomatic initiatives,” terms favored by Israeli leftists who find the status quo vis-à-vis the Arabs untenable. Yet, gaining time and waiting for the Arabs to change and accept Israel has been the Zionist strategy from David Ben-Gurion’s time. Moreover, Rabinovitch offers little criticism of the security risks taken by Rabin in accepting the Oslo agreement, which was described by his disciple Ehud Barak as having “a lot of holes. It’s like Swiss cheese.”

Similarly, Rabin’s willingness to withdraw to the 1967 line in his negotiations with Syria elicits no discussion of its potential repercussions, particularly when the current Syrian predicament, with both Shiite and Sunni radicals pressing up against the Israeli border, is so evident. Finally, the author’s dislike for Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu and for religious Zionists (a much more pluralistic group than presented) is fairly strident and echoes the frustration of Israel’s left with changes in Israel’s society and politics that it can no longer control.

The author also misreads Rabin’s approach to the first intifada and the Palestinian

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issue. Rabin never believed that the only way to deal with these issues was by finding a political solution. For Rabin, any political solution was predicated upon Israel’s

superior military power and its occasional use. In Rabin’s mind, military power and diplomatic efforts were not disconnected.

With Rabin’s untimely death, Rabinovitch feels that “Israel started its march away from Rabin’s way.” This assessment is misleading. It ignores the evidence of Rabin’s ambivalence toward Yasir Arafat over his failure both to deliver on “territories for security” (not peace) and on abolishing those clauses in the PLO covenant calling for Israel’s destruction. Rabin clearly had second thoughts about the wisdom of Oslo; he knew that it was increasingly unpopular and that he might lose the next elections as a result of it, as all polls at that time showed.

Ultimately, Yitzhak Rabin was a tragic figure. A singular element of the tragedy is that an assassin prevented the honest and security-oriented soldier-politician from trying to right the very problematic course that he had championed.

Efraim Inbar is Professor Emeritus at Bar-Ilan University, a Shillman-Ginsburg fellow at the Middle East Forum, and the author of *Rabin and Israel’s National Security* (Washington: Wilson Center and Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

