

December 13, 2020

Interview of David Irvy

Citation:

"Interview of David Irvy", December 13, 2020, Wilson Center Digital Archive, Contributed by Or Rabinowitz. <https://digitalarchive.umd.edu/document/250394>

Summary:

Interview with David Irvy, former Director General of the Israeli Ministry of Defense, chairman of Israel Aircraft Industries (IAI), deputy chief of the General Staff at the IDF, and commander of the Israeli Air Force. Interview conducted by Or Rabinowitz.

Credits:

This document was made possible with support from Carnegie Corporation of New York (CCNY)

Original Language:

English, Hebrew

Contents:

Original Scan

Or Rabinowitz interview with Gen. (ret) David Ivry, 13 December 2020

Background for interview

This interview was conducted by phone in Hebrew, on 13 December 2020, the transcribed Hebrew version was translated by author, Or Rabinowitz. Ivry served as the Director General of the Israeli Ministry of Defense, chairman of Israel Aircraft Industries (IAI), deputy chief of the General Staff at the IDF, and commander of the Israeli Air Force. Square parenthesis indicated author clarification.

When did the early thoughts on the missile threat facing Israel first arise?

“In 1982 Syrian Minister of Defense, Mustafa Tlass, published a book predicting that the next war would be a war of surface-to-surface missiles [SSM]. I took this very seriously and started thinking about how to defend against SSM. The military did not want to pay attention to this, and most of the documents from that period made statements such as ‘Scuds are not accurate, their Circular Error Probable [CEP] would be around 2,000 meters, and on the other hand, the Israeli response would be overwhelming’. Therefore, the argument went, they [The Arab countries] would not dare to launch them. Consequently, there is no point in preparing to defend. I treated the issue as being much more serious.”

[On Abrahamson’s February 1986 visit to Israel]

“at this stage, 1985, I was the chairman of the Israel Aircraft Industries. I invited General Abrahamson, head of the SDIO, for a visit. I had already known him well; he was the head of the F-16 project when I was the commander of the Israeli Air Force, and I had visited him. At one point he was assigned to NASA...he took me to one of the first launches of the shuttle Columbia. We were very good friends. When he became the head of SDI, I invited him to the annual Technion lecture in February 1986, together with the Ministry of Defense.

“We [IAI] had him for a day and a half, we gave him a day and a half presentation with our thoughts on SSM. [Dov] Raviv spoke about the idea of a missile against missiles, I presented five ideas, including boost phase interception... Finally, he said ‘on the defence issue I can help you. On the offense issue, our policy is not to assist in the development of offensive capabilities, only on defense... You are working on defense against tactical missiles, we are working more on defense against intercontinental missiles, maybe we can promote this’. Later we concluded that they [The Americans] would finance 70 percent, and we would contribute 30 percent in the form of logistics and equipment; and we started the development

process. In 1986 I started my position as Director General of the Ministry of Defense, following a year with the IAI... we continued the process with Abrahamson.... He was convinced here, and this is where the program began”.

[On the IDF's objection to Arrow]

“The Arrow project specifically saw intensive objection by the military establishment. The objectors maintained that there is no point in investing in defensive measures, but rather we should invest only in offensive measures. I had always maintained that without defensive measures it is impossible to carry out an offense; this requires the correct combination, you need a minimum form of defense and maximum offense, but you must maintain the minimum, and I was talking about active defense.

[The Iran-Iraq War and the War on the Cities]

As General Director of the Ministry of Defense I wrote a few letters in 1988, following the Iran-Iraq War...I wrote that Iraq had launched Scud missiles on a capital city, on civilians, and therefore we need to take into consideration the possibility that someone may dare launch missiles at Israeli cities... The Arabs may dare to launch missiles at Israeli cities since they have no other option, they have no effective air force. I wrote a very stern letter, but nothing changed until the prelude to the Gulf War in 1990.”

[How did Yitzhak Rabin as Minister of Defense view Arrow?]

“Rabin was not fully convinced [of the need to develop Arrow] but gave me backing and thought I was right, and that this should be addressed. He was always hesitant, and I had to deal with the IDF's objection almost exclusively. When they [The IDF's top officers] said they were only willing to go along with a development program, and not procurement, he gave this his backing and supported it.”

[The months leading to the Gulf War]

Before the Gulf War erupted, a new minister took office, Moshe Arens. He was the first to authorize the budget...the procurement issue was constantly covered in the media; the air force objected [to procure Arrow], the army does not want it... The cancellation of the Lavi project in 1987 – Zakheim was here, he promised us that some of the funding would go to the Arrow missile. We told him, listen, the industry will collapse, he promised us this would not

be the case, Arrow would be funded. After the Gulf War the military still objected. The first test launches failed, and it was not a simple situation.

On AIPAC's involvement in lobbying for Arrow during initial stage

“AIPAC were helpful only in later stages, they entered the picture only after the Lavi project was terminated. In later stages I asked AIPAC to assist me. They were not very dominant because the military had told them that it [Arrow] was not required, and so on, so they assisted me with much trepidation...A part of it was due to my own personal requests...in those years they assisted, they were involved here and there.”