

Record of Conversation

Between M.S. Gorbachev and Prime Minister of Israel Y. Shamir

29 October 1991 [with attached Shamir letter to Bush and Gorbachev dated 23 October]

M.S. Gorbachev. I am pleased to meet you, Mr. Prime Minister. It is good that relations between our countries have been established. Let's say that the ice has been broken.

Y. Shamir. I have always strived for this.

M.S. Gorbachev. In the Soviet Union, the mood was in favor of establishing relations. I have always been in favor of contacts between our people and encouraged in every possible way trips to Israel. I remember Chingiz Aitmatov, who was then a member of the Executive Council, on his return from Israel said that he felt great there. I asked: "what, you were well received?" And he replied that he felt at home there, because in Tel Aviv Russian is heard everywhere, more than in some of our republics.

It is significant that our meeting is taking place on the eve of such a historic event as the peace conference on the Middle East. I received your letter outlining the four points. I think - and I spoke about this with George Bush today - that many difficulties lie ahead on the way to a settlement. Let's not oversimplify anything. But at the same time, the situation today is not what it used to be. We must seek a constructive balance of interests. You can rely on us to constantly pursue in bilateral relations the idea that all states have the right to guaranteed security. Only on this basis can we build normal, peaceful relations.

At the press conference today, the U.S. president and I said that we have done everything to bring the parties to the negotiating table. Now the floor is theirs. Much remains to be done.

I can tell you that we are close to the appointment of a Soviet ambassador to Israel. There are many [people] interested. Yesterday on television the opening of the Israeli embassy was shown. The former consul became ambassador. He is working well.

I have left Moscow for a few days, where there are a lot of things to do. We must now move towards the market, towards the restructuring of our statehood, move from a totalitarian, unitary state to the Union of Sovereign States. There are many problems – economic, social, interethnic problems – it's all intermixed. And sometimes people who yesterday were ardent

supporters of the previous regime have now become radicals, oppositionists. It is not easy to build democratic structures. There are overlaps, a lot of populist phraseology and recklessness. But now is the time for constructive work. The shift from opposition to responsibility – this is a tough case. But you know that.

What do you think about the conference, how will it go?

Y. Shamir. First of all, I hope that it will improve the situation one way or another.

M.S. Gorbachev. I think so too.

Y. Shamir. We have no illusion that the conference will immediately solve all problems. The conflict is old, complex, and emotional. But the parties need to start talking to each other. And between nations, and between people, and between states, the very worst condition is when they do not talk to each other. It is necessary to talk, to discuss, to argue, and then the moment comes when you need to demonstrate political will. And then the issue is resolved.

We are grateful to you, Mr. President, for the fact that it is under your leadership that we are taking this historic step, renewing relations with the Soviet Union. We believe that over the years we have lost a lot due to the lack of contacts with the USSR.

M.S. Gorbachev. The Soviet Union is also proceeding from this.

Y. Shamir. In our country there is deep sympathy for the Soviet people. Many people know Russian history and culture well. Many come from your country. They influence the image of our society.

We are interested in developing contacts with you in many different areas – in economics, science, agriculture. I have met with our people who are already cooperating with yours on economic agricultural projects. This is a small but good start.

M.S. Gorbachev. I think we will succeed in cooperation. An interesting idea is the construction of water desalination plants. Much can be done in the field of aircraft construction, oil, and shipbuilding industries. We have a long-standing relationship with the renowned Canadian

entrepreneur Raichman. He visited me recently. He shared his impressions from participating in a conference where issues of religious education were discussed. He said that recently a lot has changed for the better. There are already 22 schools in Moscow where Jewish religion and culture are studied.

By the way, after the failure of the [August 1991] coup, many who wanted to come to you from the USSR changed their minds and decided not to go.

Y. Shamir. Well, let them decide for themselves where they want to live. We are grateful to you for the fact that laws have been adopted in the Soviet Union to ensure the right to leave the country. This is important for us, for our people. Our people will remember this. And they know how to remember.

We are very grateful to you for your statement against antisemitism. We have welcomed these words with great attention.

M.S. Gorbachev. Soviet Jews have repeatedly called on me to take a clear position against anti-Semitism. And I have always stressed that I oppose all manifestations of nationalism, including chauvinism, antisemitism, and so forth. I must say that even now, when there is social tension, a situation in which there is the temptation to look for a scapegoat, as it were, there has not been an increase in antisemitism. In general, society is not susceptible to this disease, although there are isolated hotbeds or outbreaks. This is also evidence of important changes.

The 50th anniversary of the tragedy at Babi Yar allowed me to make a statement on this topic. I sent there as my personal representative A.N. Yakovlev, who delivered this statement; it had a great response.

At the same time, such a sensitive moment must be taken into account. Decades of a totalitarian regime have brought suffering to literally all peoples. Many were subjected to deportation, repression, and were declared criminals. These are Germans, Chechens, Ingush, and many others. The Russian people suffered a lot.

Y. Shamir. This is true. At the same time, our tragedy has a specific nature. I want to once again express my appreciation for your position.

A few words about our region. During the 24 years that we had no contact with you, an arms race has arisen in the region. Some countries received weapons from the United States, others from the USSR. Now the scale of this phenomenon has become somewhat smaller. We would like to express our hope that the Soviet Union will not contribute to an arms race in the region. I mean, for example, the sale of tanks to Syria, which still embraces rather extreme positions.

M.S. Gorbachev. Let's negotiate on such things all together. The five permanent members of the Security Council discussed this issue recently in London. And in July, I talked about the problem of arms transfers with the U.S. president during his visit to Moscow. I think this is one of the issues that needs to be discussed at this conference, including in both a bilateral and a multilateral context. There is probably no need to emphasize one or the other course. It is necessary to seek the truth both in bilateral and multilateral negotiations.

Y. Shamir. We believe that both are important. Of course, bilateral negotiations are of paramount importance. But multilateral discussions are also important, for there are such problems as, for example, arms reduction, water resources, energy, which it is important to discuss together.

M.S. Gorbachev. You will be one of the first to speak at the conference. We expect you to speak constructively and set a constructive tone for the discussion. Now it's up to you and to the parties – although, of course, we are co-chairs, and we do not wash our hands of it.

Y. Shamir. You will administer "remote control." One technical but nonetheless important point: we believe that bilateral negotiations should be held directly in the region, in rotation, say, in Israel, Syria, and Jordan. This is important politically, but at the same time also organizationally. Keeping a large group of people in Madrid is expensive. We would prefer to hold negotiations in the region.

M.S. Gorbachev. As the ancient Romans said, let the other side be heard. And they have their own opinion on this matter. We must find a mutually acceptable solution.

Y. Shamir. We want to negotiate seriously. If [negotiations] are conducted in a third country, then it would be difficult for me to give them due attention, to meet with our representatives, to give them instructions. If we talk in the region, then there are more chances for progress.

B.D. Pankin. I, Mr. Prime Minister, would not be doing my duty as co-chair if I did not tell you that both James Baker and I believe it is important and desirable that at least the first round of bilateral talks be held in Madrid.

Y. Shamir. The first meeting.

B.D. Pankin. We are talking about the first phase of bilateral meetings.

M.S. Gorbachev. Mr. Prime Minister, should you really put yourself under direct pressure from the press, public opinion, and so forth? Is it worth it to be under the spotlight all the time and the attention of a not always friendly public? Isn't it better to play "on a neutral field"?

I cannot fail to mention that we condemn the terrorist act that has just been committed against Israeli citizens.

In conclusion, I would like to say that I see you as an energetic person committed to the settlement process. Now the challenge is to move forward. I wish you success.

Y. Shamir. Thank you. I would like to invite you to visit our country. This will give us the opportunity to discuss all the problems. Our people will be very happy to see you in Israel.

M.S. Gorbachev. Now that normal relations have been established between our countries, I am counting on the fact that we will have constant personal contacts with you. I'm ready for this. As for the visit ...

B.D. Pankin. Perhaps after the end of the conference and a peaceful settlement.

Sent to the MFA CCCP

By the Consul General of Israel.

October 24, 1991.

Translated from English.

Esteemed President George Bush,
Esteemed President M.S. Gorbachev.

On behalf of the Government of Israel, I would like to acknowledge with gratitude the receipt of your joint invitation to participate in the peace conference to launch direct bilateral and multilateral peace talks.

We deeply appreciate your efforts, which have culminated in the decision to begin this process, and we hope that it will lead to the peace that is so vitally needed for our region.

Israel will take part in the conference and in bilateral and multilateral negotiations. Our response is based on the following understandings, which we hope your two countries will help to implement:

First: the goal of the negotiations is the conclusion of the peace treaties. This should be clear to all the participants in the bilateral negotiations.

Second: countries that participate in bilateral negotiations should participate to the same degree in multilateral negotiations. This will be a major test of intentions towards peace and coexistence with Israel.

Third: The UN will not be directly or indirectly part of the process. This applies to the Jordanian-Palestinian delegation and, in particular, to the Palestinian element in this delegation, its composition, and conduct.

Fourth: bilateral negotiations should bring peace to the region for many reasons and practical considerations that were explained during the preparatory negotiations.

We sincerely hope that the peace process, which will be launched next week, will lead to a new and positive stage in the history of our troubled region. Our country, which has always set peace as a matter of priority, will definitely view the establishment of peace as a historic achievement.

With respect,

Yitzhak Shamir

Jerusalem,

October 23, 1991

Translated: A. Maslov