

Peres Celebrates 90th Birthday Amid Public Criticism

President Shimon Peres celebrated his 90th birthday Tuesday in a gala event at the International Convention Center in Jerusalem, which also ushered in the fifth annual Presidential Conference. The star-studded event, which was attended by Hollywood and political heavyweights alike, has drawn criticism that at a time when the government is asking the public to tighten its belt, the president should have opted for a less lavish event.

Some 2,000 people attended the gala, including Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, former U.S. President Bill Clinton, former British Premier Tony Blair, Prince Albert of Monaco, renowned singer Barbra Streisand and actors Robert de Niro and Sharon Stone, alongside several Israeli Nobel Prize laureates and dozens of Israeli and foreign leaders of industry.

"Shimon, you are proof that curiosity has no age and that one can be young, no matter what age you are," Netanyahu said. "You always look to the future, and I have to tell you that it's a very Jewish quality. Shimon, you are a man of vision, a man of peace."

Video tributes by U.S. President Barack Obama, Russian President Vladimir Putin, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and King Juan Carlos of Spain were screened throughout the evening.

Obama called Peres a "living legend" and lauded his work for peace in the Middle East and for the people of Israel.

"We are here to pay tribute to the last living Israeli who knew King David," Clinton said in his address. "No Israeli

should forget that your political career spans more than 65 years. ... You were part of 12 different cabinets, and anybody who can endure that many boring meetings deserves to be 90 and more."

Clinton said Peres was "the social Albert Einstein of the world. ... You have tried to present a unified theory of science, history, technology and society."

Blair, who also serves as the Quartet's Middle East envoy, offered his congratulations to "the youngest 90-year-old I know," adding, "We have our queen, and you have your Shimon."

Streisand's performance included—at Peres' request—the Avinu Malkeinu prayer, as well as one of her signature numbers, "People."

The president thanked the many people who attended the evening, saying, "I'm thrilled and honored to see so many friends here tonight. I greatly appreciate that you have all come to mark the birthday of a man whose only crime is getting a year older."

"I know that you have come to Jerusalem from all over the world to salute our people and the state of Israel, as I do. I feel privileged that the chapters of my life are intertwined with the inception and building of the state of Israel. ... It is a unique privilege."

Meanwhile, Israel's social networks were teeming with criticism over the nature and scope of what has been called Peres' "relentless cult of personality."

Many on Facebook and Twitter said that given the economic situation, the president should have passed on the multimillion-shekel event in favor of a more modest celebration, saying there was no need to "import" all the A-list guests that attended the event.

“In a time when the Israeli public is required to endure cutbacks, President Peres should have exercised some discretion and refrain from holding a pretentious festival, more suited for Louis XVI,” Jerusalem Councilman attorney Yair Gabbay (Likud) said.

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