

Prime Minister's Statement on the Military Situation

Introduction

Hopes for determined American and international action to reopen the Straits soon evaporated. Public opinion in Israel—with full mobilization involving practically the total paralysis of all economic, educational and cultural activity—was growing increasingly impatient with the apparent indecision of the Government as a whole, and of the Prime Minister in particular. That impression was heightened by the halting delivery of the Prime Minister's radio address to the nation. Under the pressure of public opinion, aided by a group subsequently nicknamed "The Merry Wives of Windsor," Eshkol invited the leaders of the major Opposition parties—Gahal and Rafi—to join the Government. The leaders of Gahal became Ministers without Portfolio, while Moshe Dayan, representing Rafi, became Minister of Defense. The 81-year-old Ben-Gurion (whom Begin had proposed as Prime Minister) declined, preferring to remain outside the Cabinet.

The watershed in Israel's foreign relations also turned into one in its domestic history. For the first time Gahal was part of the Government, and ten years later Mr. Begin was to become Prime Minister. Moshe Dayan was still Minister of Defense during the Yom Kippur War, in 1973. At its first meeting, on 4 June 1967, the newly-enlarged Cabinet decided to undertake an all-out offensive against Egypt. In the early hours of 5 June 1967 the Israel Air Force attacked the Egyptian Air Force, most of whose planes were on the ground at the time. A few hours later, while a complete news blackout was still in force, Eshkol imparted some vague information to the Knesset, at the same time informing it of the changes in the composition of the Government, which required the Knesset's approval. This was granted after a minimal debate, in a mood of supreme unity, after which Knesset Members spontaneously sang the national anthem, "Hatikva." For the first time Ben-Gurion and Begin were observed talking amiably to one another, some claim, embracing one another. Some emergency fiscal and budgetary laws were adopted at that sitting, in the same climate of unanimity. During the course of the Prime Minister's statement Jordanian artillery was shelling Jerusalem, including the Knesset building, and the sitting took place in the basement shelter.

Sitting 182 of the Sixth Knesset

5 June 1967 (26 Iyar 5727)

The Speaker, K. Luz: We send our blessing to the IDF and the citizens of the state; we trust in the skill, resolution and courage of our soldiers and our men, women and children. The State of Israel lives and fights; the people of Israel lives....

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The Prime Minister, L. Eshkol: Mr. Speaker, distinguished Knesset, before bringing the expansion of the Government before the Knesset, I must inform the Knesset and the nation of a fateful development which befell the State of Israel today. Fierce battles began this morning between the Air Forces of Egypt and Israel, during the course of which the Egyptian Air Force suffered heavy losses. During the course of the day the Air Forces of Syria and Jordan attacked us too, and were also defeated by our Air Force.

Since the morning our forces on the land and in the air have had to fight back, with the object of defeating the armies of the aggressive Egyptian ruler. The battle is still under way. The IDF has not let us down and is standing up to the test, as it will in the future, too. The battles are now being conducted across Israel's border, in the Sinai. I will not give details now, for obvious reasons, neither figures, places nor names. All I can say is that our forces are driving the enemy back.

In my radio broadcast this morning I stressed that Israel would not attack any country which has not waged war on us. But anyone who attacks us will encounter the full force of our capacity to defend ourselves and defeat the enemy. Despite that warning, Syrian and Jordanian forces joined in the hostilities against Israel by aerial bombing as well as shelling from artillery and firearms. More than anywhere else, perhaps, Jerusalem provides evidence of this. The forces of those countries opened fire on various fronts, including the capital, Jerusalem. The IDF began a counteroffensive, as was required in order to defend the state and repel the enemy.

Members of the Knesset, I feel it would not be superfluous to give a brief review of the background to the recent events. Upon the establishment of the State of Israel the Arab armies tried to crush the infant state. After our forces successfully withstood superior Arab armies it will be recalled that Armistice Agreements were signed between Israel and its neighbors. Those agreements...were intended to serve as a transition to a lasting peace, but the Arab countries refused to discuss peace and embarked on preparations to destroy Israel on the battlefield.

Openly defying the Armistice Agreements and the U.N. Charter, the Arab countries imposed a blockade and an economic embargo on Israel, declared a state of belligerency and rejected every proposal for negotiations and a settlement as outlined in the U.N. Charter. In other

words, they sought to separate Israel from the rest of the world, remove it from the aegis of international law and place it beyond the pale of the relations between the countries of the world.

This state of belligerency and aggression has continued incessantly for the last nineteen years. There were periods of relative calm, which were rapidly replaced by acts of hostility by the Arabs against us. This year, approximately three weeks ago, Israel began to be threatened in a way which was unprecedented in the entire history of the state. The entire situation became volatile as a result of a series of aggressive steps taken by the Egyptian ruler. The first step was the introduction of a huge Egyptian force into the eastern Sinai. This was followed by the withdrawal of the U.N. Force. Then came the closing of the Straits of Tiran to Israeli and international shipping, which constituted an act of war. These steps were accompanied by feverish preparations for an all-out war of destruction against Israel, at least according to his statements and boasts.

Initially the Egyptian ruler fallaciously claimed that he was acting in order to deter Israel from attacking Syria. He spread the lie—and there were those who helped him in this—that Israeli forces were massed on the northern border. Our statements that there was no such massing of our forces, and the U.N. Secretariat's confirmation of this, were to no avail. But Nasser soon revealed his hand; from making the false claim that his intention was to defend Syria, he switched to the desire to change the status quo in the Straits of Tiran. Nasser did not conceal his view that he wanted to turn the wheel of history back, to before the establishment of the State of Israel, to before 1948, his plan being to stifle Israel's independence....

Prior to cutting Israel off he made an agreement with Syria, which has been responsible for the acts of terrorism directed against Israel during the last two years. In order to complete the circle, in the last few days he made pacts with Jordan and Iraq. By this morning five infantry and two armored divisions had been drawn up in the Sinai and there were 900 tanks along the border, 200 of them facing Eilat, with the obvious intention of cutting off the southern Negev. Iraqi troops and Egyptian commando battalions have reached Jordan and the Jordanian Army has been placed under Egyptian command. During the last ten days Egypt has flown air sorties over Israel. Following Nasser's announcement of his intention to wage all-out war on Israel, the Commander of the Egyptian forces, General Mortaga, issued an order of the day to his troops, in clear and simple words, which was quoted on Cairo Radio on June 3, as follows:

"The eyes of the whole world are upon you in your most glorious war against the aggressive Israeli imperialists on your homeland, awaiting the outcome of your holy war to conquer the rights of the Arab people. The results of this special moment are of historic importance for our

Arab nation and the holy war in which you will restore plundered Arab rights in Palestine and reconquer the stolen land, with the help of God and the ability of justice, by force of arms and the unity of your faith."

During the past few weeks we have done our utmost to persuade influential political elements in the West and the East to exert their influence with the object of removing the danger from our border, opening the Straits and restoring the previous situation. This aspiration was not fulfilled. While we were still hoping for deterrent political influence, under the auspices of heads of state, the warlike deployment of the aggressive forces of Egypt and the Arab countries under Egyptian leadership grew from day to day. The bellicose incitement of the Egyptian ruler and his aides reached unprecedented heights and Israel was threatened with attack on all fronts.

When the threat became reality and the Egyptian war machine was set in motion, we had to defend our lives and fight back. The forces on the front are Israeli and only Israeli. Our soldiers on land, sea and air, who have the love and trust of the nation, are imbued with a spirit of heroism and are led by talented, experienced and able commanders. Our Army is ready for any danger and can defend the country and repel any aggressor. The nation wishes God-speed to its soldiers—it behooves me to say this from this podium—who are risking their lives to defend their country. To the citizens at the rear I say, remain calm, each and every one of you; do what you have to do with dedication and efficiency, placing your abilities at the disposal of the nation.

At a time such as this, which may be one of a cruel and bloody struggle, the distinction between battlefield and rear becomes blurred. At a time such as this the whole nation is an army, the whole country is the battlefield. Each and every one of us, everywhere and at all times, must regard himself as being charged with the defense of Israel. All of us, led by our Army, will defeat those who have risen up against us. I would like to mention the wonderful display of solidarity from our brethren in the diaspora. The identification of the Jewish people with the State of Israel irradiates us with light and security. The sense of brotherhood and unity which beats in the heart of every Jew brings those who are far near and bridges distances. The Jewish heart, wherever it may be, beats now with the State of Israel and yearns for victory.

From the Knesset I would like to express my deep gratitude to the many Gentiles throughout the world, statesmen and intellectuals as well as simple folk, who have been shocked by the threat to Israel's welfare and have expressed their feelings in an unparalleled wave of support for the State of Israel.

Mr. Speaker, Members of the Knesset, I would like to say that even in times of battle we have not abandoned our aspiration for peace. I would like to ask the Arab countries who, for almost twenty years, have chosen the path of threats and aggression instead of cooperation and

peace: what good has that attitude done you? Precious resources have been wasted to finance the cold and hot war against Israel. Since 1952 Egypt alone spent more than 4 billion dollars on establishing its military force and its war machine. During that period all the Arab countries and Israel spent more than 10 billion dollars on military needs. That sum would have been enough to rescue a great many of the peoples of the region from poverty and sickness and to lay the foundations of widespread economic and social progress. The time has come for the Arab nations to do some soulsearching, which may perhaps persuade them to prefer peace and progress to hostility and bloodshed. At this moment I will even go so far as to say that peace will surely come to our region, even though it tarries, because all of us, throughout the region, need it.

To the leaders of the West and the East I would like to say from this podium: competition between the Powers and the Blocs has played no small part in intensifying the arms race in the Middle East and the continual increase of tension in our region. For years we appealed for international action to further peace in our region and demanded the cessation of the arms race with the object of attaining the mutually-supervised disarmament of the countries of the region. We demanded that the territorial and political integrity of all the countries of the region be guaranteed. To my regret, our requests were fruitless. There is a lesson to be learned from this.

Since the beginning of the present tension views have been expressed as to the need to broaden the Government and its parliamentary base. When I felt that the testing time was approaching—on the battlefields—I took the initiative of establishing a wide Emergency Government, and invited Gahal and Rafi to join it. By now you all know that the negotiations have borne fruit, and I welcome the expansion of the Government.

Taking the emergency conditions into account, the Ministers involved were informed of the decision and appointed to their positions three or four days ago, before their appointments had gained the approval of the Knesset. I regret to hear that my colleague Moshe Dayan has left already...and I understand why he was in a hurry to go.

I am confident that the new Ministers have realized, in the last few days more than ever, how strong is the military force we have been developing over the years since the establishment of the state, and especially in the last few years. A mighty, powerful and able force, which is not behind in scientific and technological developments, has been established. The new Ministers saw the IDF being mobilized and I am sure that they were deeply impressed by the first-rate planning of the General Staff as well as by the IDF's battle capacity. I am sure that this force will lead us to victory, and the expansion of the Government will strengthen us in our course and enable us to overcome all obstacles.