

Abba Eban's Historic Address

Major Excerpts From Statement to the UN

In recent weeks the Middle East has passed through a crisis whose shadows darken the world. This crisis has many consequences but only one cause: Israel's right to peace, to security, to sovereignty, to economic development, to maritime freedom — indeed its very right to exist — has been forcibly denied and aggressively attacked.

This is the true origin of the tension which torments the Middle East. All the other elements of the conflict are the consequences of this single cause. There has been danger, there is still peril in the Middle East because Israel's existence, sovereignty and vital interests have been and are vitally assailed.

Today's intemperate utterance illustrates the lack of equilibrium and objectivity which has contributed so much to the tension and agony of Middle Eastern life.

I come to this rostrum to speak for a united people which, having faced danger to the national survival, is unshakably resolved to resist any course which would renew the perils from which it emerged.

The General Assembly is chiefly preoccupied by the situation against which Israel defended itself on the morning of June 5. I shall invite every peace-loving state represented here to ask itself how it would have acted on that day if it faced similar dangers.

But if our discussion is to have any weight or depth, we must understand that great events are not born in a single instant of time. It is beyond all honest doubt that between May 14 and June 5, Arab governments, led and directed by President Nasser, methodically prepared and mounted an aggressive assault designed to bring about Israel's immediate and total destruction.

My authority for that conviction rests on the statements and action of Arab governments themselves. There is every reason to believe what they say and to observe what they do.

From 1948 to this very day there has not been one statement by any Arab representative of a neighboring Arab state indicating readiness to respect existing agreements on the permanent renunciation of force, especially the Charter agreement, to recognize Israel's sovereign right to existence or to apply to Israel any of the central provisions of the United Nations Charter.

For some time Israel showed a stoic patience in her reaction to these words of menace. This was because the threats were not accompanied by a capacity to carry them into effect. But the inevitable result of this campaign of menace was the burden of a heavy race in arms. We strove to maintain an adequate deterrent strength; and the decade beginning in March, 1957, was not monopolized by security considerations alone.

Behind the wall of a strong defense, with eyes vigilantly fixed on dangerous borders, we embarked on a constructive era in the national enterprise.

Arab hostility towards Israel became increasingly isolated, while Israel's position in the international family became more deeply entrenched. Many in the world drew confidence from the fact that a very small nation could, by its exertion and example, rise to respected levels in social progress, scientific research and the humane arts.

And so our policy was to deter the aggression of our neighbors so long as it was endurable; to resist it only when failure to resist would have invited its intensified renewal; to withstand Arab violence without being obsessed by it; and even to search patiently here and there for any glimmer of moderation and realism in the Arab mind. We also pursued the hope of bringing all the great powers to a harmonious policy in support of the security and sovereignty of Middle Eastern states.

We were able to limit our response to this aggression so long as its own scope appeared to be limited.

But Israel's danger was great. The military build-up in Egypt proceeded at an intensive rate. It was designed to enable Egypt to press its war plans against Israel while maintaining its violent adventures elsewhere. In the face of these developments Israel was forced to devote an increasing part of its resources to self-defense.

With the declaration by Syria in 1965 of the doctrine of a "day-by-day military confrontation," the situation in the Middle East grew darker.

The Palestine Liberation Organization, the Palestine Liberation Army, the United Arab Command, the intensified expansion of military forces and equipment in Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and more remote parts of the Arab continent — these were the signals of a growing danger to which we sought to alert the mind and conscience of the world.

June, 1967, was to be the month of decision. The "final solution" was at hand.

There was no convincing motive for the aggressive design which was now unfolded. Egyptian and Soviet sources have claimed, and we read the claim repeated today, that a concentrated Israeli invasion of Syria was expected during the second or third week of May.

No claim could be more frivolous or far-fetched. It is true that Syria was sending terrorists into Israel to lay mines on public roads and, on one occasion, to bombard the Israeli settlement at Manara from the Lebanese border. The accumulation of such actions had sometimes evoked Israeli responses limited in scope and time. All that Syria had to do to insure perfect tranquility on her frontier with Israel was to discourage the terrorist war.

Not only did she not discourage those actions: she

encouraged them. She gave them every moral and practical support. But the picture of Israeli troop concentrations in strength for an invasion of Syria in mid-May was a monstrous fiction. Twice Syria refused to cooperate with suggestions made by the United Nations authorities and accepted by Israel for a simultaneous and reciprocal inspection of the Israeli-Syrian frontier.

On one occasion the Soviet Ambassador complained to my Prime Minister of heavy troop concentrations in the north of Israel. But when invited to join the Prime Minister that very moment in a visit to any part of Israel which he liked, the distinguished envoy brusquely refused.

The prospect of finding out the truth at first hand seemed to fill him with a profound disquiet.

There is only one thing to be said about Prime Minister Kosygin's assertion this morning that there were heavy concentrations of Israeli troops in the Syrian frontier in mid-May. The only thing to say about the assertion is that it is completely untrue.

There is only one thing to be said about these descriptions of villages being burned and inhabitants being shot. These are false, inflammatory words of propaganda designed to inflame passions in an area already too hot with tension.

By the ninth of May the Secretary General of the United Nations, from his own sources on the ground, had ascertained that no such Israeli troop concentrations had



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existed. This fact had been directly communicated to the Syrian and Egyptian governments. The excuse had been shattered, but the allegation still remained.

The steps which I now come to describe could not possibly have any motive or justification in an Israeli troop concentration in the north, which both Egypt and Syria knew did not exist. Indeed the Egyptian build-up ceased very quickly even to be described by its authors as the result of any threat to Syria. Let us now see how the design began to unfold.

On May 14, Egyptian forces began to move into Sinai.

On May 16, the Egyptian command ordered the United Nations Emergency Force to leave the border.

On May 18, Egypt called for the total removal of the United Nations Emergency Force. The Secretary General of the United Nations acceded to this request and moved to carry it out, without reference to the Security Council or the General Assembly; without carrying out the procedures indicated by Secretary General Hammarskjöld in the event of a request for a withdrawal being made; without heeding the protesting voices of some of the permanent members of the Security Council and of the government at whose initiative the force had been established; without consulting Israel on the consequent prejudice of her military security and her vital maritime freedom; and without seeking such delay as would enable alternate measures to be concerted for preventing belligerency by sea and a dangerous confrontation of forces by land.

It is often said that United Nations procedures are painfully slow. This one, in our view, was disastrously swift. Its effect was to make Sinai safe for belligerency from north and south, to create a sudden disruption of the local security balance and to leave an international maritime interest exposed to almost certain threat.

I will not say anything of the compulsions that led to the decision. I have already said that Israel's attitude to the peace-keeping functions of the United Nations has been traumatically affected by this experience. What is the use of a fire brigade which vanishes from the scene as soon as the first smoke and flames appear? Is it surprising that we are firmly resolved never again to allow a vital Israeli interest and our very security to rest on such fragile foundation?

Now, those who write this story in years to come

will give a special place in their narrative to the blatant decision to close the Straits of Tiran in Israel's face. It is not difficult to understand why this outrage had such a drastic impact.

In 1957 the maritime nations, within the framework of the United Nations General Assembly, correctly enunciated the doctrine of free and innocent passage through the Strait. When that doctrine was proclaimed — and incidentally, not challenged by Egypt at that time — it was little more than an abstract principle for the maritime world. For Israel, it was a great but still unfulfilled prospect; it was not yet a reality.

But during the 10 years in which we and the other states of the maritime community have relied upon that doctrine and upon established usage, the principle has become a reality consecrated by hundreds of sailings under dozens of flags and the establishment of a whole complex of commerce and industry and communication.

The blockade is by definition an act of war, imposed and enforced through armed violence. Never in history have blockade and peace existed side by side. From May 24 onward, the question who started the war or who fired the first shot became momentarily irrelevant. There is no difference in civil law between murdering a man by slow strangulation or killing him by a shot in the head. From the moment at which the blockade was posed, active hostilities had commenced and Israel owed Egypt nothing of her Charter rights.

Nobody who lived those days of Israel between May 23 and June 5 will ever forget the heavy foreboding that hung over our country.

There was peril wherever she looked, and she faced it in deepening solitude. On May 24 and on succeeding days, the Security Council conducted a desultory debate which sometimes reached a point of levity. The Soviet representative asserted that he saw no reason for discussing the Middle Eastern situation at all.

A crushing siege bore down upon us. Multitudes throughout the world trembled for Israel's fate.

And so, on the fateful morning of June 5, when Egyptian forces moved by air and land against Israel's western coast and southern territory, our country's choice was plain. The choice was to live or perish, to defend the national existence or to forfeit it for all time. I will not narrate what then transpired.

From these dire moments, Israel emerged in five heroic days from awful peril to successful and glorious resistance. Alone, unaided, neither seeking nor receiving help, our nation rose in self-defense.

Mr. President, I have spoken of Israel's defense against the assaults of neighboring states. This is not the entire story. Whatever happens in the Middle East for good or ill, for peace or conflict, is powerfully affected by what the great powers do or omit to do. When the Soviet Union initiates a discussion here, our gaze is inexorably drawn to the story of its role in recent Middle Eastern history. It is a sad and shocking story; it must be frankly told.

Since 1955 the Soviet Union has supplied the Arab states with 2,000 tanks, of which more than 1,000 have gone to Egypt.

The Soviet Union has supplied the Arab states with 700 modern fighter aircraft and bombers; more recently with ground missiles, and Egypt alone has received from the USSR 540 field guns, 130 medium guns, 200 120-mm. mortars, 695 antiaircraft guns, 175 rocket launchers, 650 antitank guns, 7 destroyers; a number of Luna M and Sopka 2 ground-to-ground missiles, 14 submarines and 46 torpedo boats of various types including missile-carrying boats. The Egyptian Army has been trained by Soviet experts.

The constant increase and escalation of Soviet armaments in Arab countries has driven Israel to a corresponding though far smaller procurement program. Israel's arms purchases were precisely geared to the successive phases of Arab, and especially Egyptian, rearmament.

For Israel's attitude is clear: We should like to see the arms race slowed down. But if the race is joined, we are determined not to lose it. A fearful waste of economic energy in the Middle East is the direct result of the Soviet role in the constant stimulation of the race in arms.

The USSR has exercised her veto right in the Security Council five times. Each time a just and constructive judgment has been frustrated.

Now this use of the veto has had a dual effect. First, it prevented any resolution to which an Arab state was opposed from being adopted by the Council. Secondly, it has inhibited the Security Council from taking constructive action in disputes between an Arab state and Israel because of the certain knowledge that the veto would be applied in what was deemed to be the Arab interest.

The consequences of the Soviet veto policy have been to deny Israel any possibility of just and equitable treatment in the Security Council; and to nullify the Council as a constructive factor in the affairs of the Middle East.

In the light of this history, the General Assembly will easily understand Israel's reaction to the Soviet initiative in convening this special session, not for the purpose of proposing constructive and balanced solutions but for the condemning of our country and recommending a withdrawal to the position that existed before June 5.

In respect to the request for a condemnation, I give

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