

Prime Minister Levi Eshkol Speech to the Knesset at conclusion of June War

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A week after the fighting had broken out and two days after its conclusion, the Prime Minister addressed the Knesset and reviewed the events which led to the Six-Day War and Israel's efforts to avoid armed hostilities and the diplomatic initiatives taken, and surveyed the military, operations of the past week. He concluded by renewing Israel's appeal to the Arab States to follow the road back to peace.

A week ago the momentous struggle opened. The existence of the State of Israel, the hope of the generations and the vision that has been realized in our days, hung in the balance.

Now, only a week after the last session of the Knesset, which took place to the accompaniment of the thunder of the guns, we meet with the tidings of victory ringing in our ears. The aggression of the enemy has been repelled, the greater part of his power has been broken, his military machine destroyed, the bases for aggression cleared. The threat of war has been lifted from our country. The skies above our heads are safe. The threat to Jerusalem, to the coastal plain, to the villages of the north and the corridor, to the whole of the Negev and Galilee, has been removed.

The Israel Defense Forces dominate the Sinai Peninsula as far as the Suez Canal, the West Bank of the Jordan, and the Golan Heights. The passage through the Strait of Tiran to the Gulf of Aqaba is free. Jerusalem has been reunified. For the first time since the establishment of the State, Jews pray at the Western Wall, the relic of our holy Temple and our historic past, and at Rachel's Tomb. For the first time in our generation, Jews can pray at the Cave of Machpela in Hebron, the city of the Patriarchs. The prophecy has been fulfilled: "There is recompense for the work, the sons have returned to their borders."

Now that victory has been won, let us bow our heads in reverent memory of the fallen. Hundreds of soldiers of the Israel Defense Forces and civilians have given their lives for this victory. I know that there can be no consolation for the loss of the individual and the bereavement of a family. Every living soul is an entire universe. Let all the bereaved families know that there can be no cause more just and vital than that for which the dead had fought. Let them know that by their deaths they bequeathed life to all of us. In the name of the entire nation, in the name of the Government and in my own, I assure them that we share in their grievous sorrow.

We shall always remember our dear sons, the soldiers of the Israel Defense Forces and their bold, valorous officers, whose place was always in the van, who have sanctified our people by their lives and their deaths. They join the long chain of heroism and self-sacrifice with those who have offered themselves up entirely on the altar of Israel and its Land - a chain that will never be broken.

To the wounded we wish a speedy recovery and a return to active and useful life. No one who has seen the wounded in our hospitals can fail to be moved at their courage and fortitude. We are grateful from the bottom of our hearts to the doctors, nurses and auxiliary staff, particularly to the volunteer physicians and others who have come from abroad to help in the sacred work of healing the sick.

These have been glorious and awesome days. Our people will remember them for generations to come. They were days when the spirit of Man rose to new heights. The entire nation mobilized its strength to fight for its life and its hopes. Each individual felt that it was his responsibility to do the work, and he did his duty - every man at his post.

In the course of the years - confronting, as we did, the constant threats of our enemies - we were compelled to build up the defensive and deterrent power of the Israel Defense Forces, and devoted extensive resources to their training and equipment.

The Israel Defense Forces constitute a mighty fighting force, as the whole world has learned, because of their high standards, because their officers and men are second to none - above all, because every man and officer is inspired by the mission of our people in its Land. Our forces are a people's army: when they fight, the entire nation fights; when they fight the whole of Jewish history watches them. When our army fights, it fights not only for the life of the people, but for its redemption.

Our people stood the test because it was united, because at the fateful hour it was able to concentrate its efforts and act as one man.

The people stood the test. Hundreds of thousands of young people and new immigrants, in big or little tasks, each according to his age and his abilities, proved that their roots in this country are eternal. It was shown that the spirit of the people flows from the spiritual revival of the State.

We saw clearly that this is no mere ingathering of the exiles, but a new - yet ancient - nation, a united nation, which has been tempered in the furnace into one Israel, forged out of all our tribes and the remnants of scattered communities - they, their sons and their daughters. A nation has come into being which is ready for any effort or sacrifice in order to achieve its goals.

The State of Israel has stood the test because it knew that it carried the hopes of the entire Jewish people. The unity of our people has been forged anew in these days. All the Diaspora communities were keenly conscious of their solidarity with the State of Israel, the heart of the Jewish people. Thousands of our people came forward to help. Hundreds of thousands, millions, are ready to give us all the assistance in their power. Even those who are unable to offer their aid have their hearts with us in our struggle. Just as our own country has attained a higher unity, so has the unity of the Jewish people been reinforced. Jerusalem has been joined together, and in its unity, as our sages said, it has made all Israel brethren.

The last four weeks have been weeks of tension and trial - from Independence Day, the fifth of Iyar (May 15), until that great Sabbath, the second of Sivan 5727 (June 10, 1967).

On Independence Day, powerful Egyptian forces started to cross the Canal and move in the direction of the Israeli frontier. After three days, these forces were deployed on our border.

Once the deployment was completed, Nasser demanded the withdrawal of the UN force from Sharm el-Sheikh, Sinai and the Gaza Strip.

On the morning of Tuesday, May 23, Egypt announced the closing of the Strait of Tiran to Israeli shipping and to international shipping carrying strategic material to Israel's southernmost port, Eilat.

After the Egyptian ruler had annulled the international arrangements that had been in force for the past ten years, he went on to proclaim in public his desire to wipe Israel off the map. As has now transpired, the

Commander of the Egyptian air force issued, on May 27, a secret operations order to his pilots to prepare for a surprise attack on Israel.

On May 30, Nasser signed a military agreement with Hussein. On June 4, he signed a similar agreement with Iraq. These agreements, in addition to the Egyptian-Syrian agreement, completed the encirclement of Israel - which was designed to facilitate a surprise attack upon us from all quarters.

On June 3, the then Commander of the Egyptian forces in Sinai issued an Order of the Day to his soldiers to prepare for an attack on Israel, describing the expected results of "this unique moment" as "of historic importance to the Arab people." His prophecy came true in a manner of which he did not dream at the time.

As the Egyptian forces advanced into the Sinai Peninsula, I ordered, with the consent of the Government, the beginning of the mobilization of the Israel Defense Forces' reserves. As the threat increased in gravity, mobilization was expanded and our preparedness intensified.

In my statement to the Knesset on May 29, I informed you that our forces were "ready and prepared to frustrate the enemy's designs in all sectors and on all our borders."

On the same occasion, I suggested that the Egyptian ruler might "remember that this is not the first time that he has been borne on the wings of his imagination and seen himself a victor before he has set out to war." I added that "he ought to remember that disillusionment was not long in coming, as we witnessed."

To the Israel Defense Forces I said: "Thanks to your being strong enough to overcome the enemy in any situation, the Government of Israel is able to adopt in confidence and fortitude the grave decisions that confront it, as is dictated by our supreme responsibility for the fate of the country and the Jewish people."

Last Monday, June 5, 1967, 7-8 Egyptian divisions, 2 of them armored, were deployed in front of our border in Sinai; 900 tanks were dispersed along the border 200 of them opposite Eilat, with the aim of cutting off the southern Negev; along Israel's eastern border stood 60,000 Jordanian soldiers and 300 tanks; the Jordanian army had been placed under Egyptian command, and Egyptian commando units, as well as Iraqi forces, had entered its territory.

On our northern border with Syria, 50,000 Syrian soldiers were ready for the assault, and the entire border was sown with guns and mortars, dug in, fortified, and protected by concrete and steel.

Some 600 Egyptian, Jordanian, Syrian and Iraqi planes were ready.

During the days preceding June 5, Egyptian air sorties took place over Israeli skies.

The decisive moment came. Facing the movement of Egyptian forces to the Israeli border, our forces went out to repulse the enemy's aggression, and air and armored battles developed.

In a radio broadcast a few hours later, I declared: "We shall not attack any State so long as it does not wage war against us. But anyone attacking us will meet with our full power of self-defense and our capacity to defeat his forces." Despite this unmistakable warning, the Jordanian forces, which were under Egyptian command, started attacks and bombardments all along the line - especially in Jerusalem, where much blood was spilt.

At the same time, the Syrians started attacking the villages in the north from their fortified positions in the Golan Mountains.

By Thursday, June 8, Israel's forces had defeated the enemy in Sinai, the Gaza Strip, the whole of Jerusalem and the whole of the West Bank.

On this occasion, I should like to point out that, despite the bombardment of Jerusalem, by the Jordanian forces, which caused loss of life, injury to many, and much damage to property, we refrained from any bombardment inside the city, out of consideration for the sanctity of Jerusalem and in accordance with our policy of avoiding injury to the civilian population.

Immediately after the liberation of the city, before I went to the Western Wall, I invited the heads of the Christian and Moslem communities and told them: "You may rest assured that no harm of any kind will be permitted to the religious Holy Places. I have asked the Minister of Religious Affairs to contact the religious leaders of Jerusalem in order to ensure orderly contact between them and our forces, and enable them to continue unhindered with their religious activities. From Jerusalem - the age-old symbol of peace, from the Holy City to which its tranquility has been restored - I want to join with you in issuing a call to peace to all the nations of the area and to the world at large."

Arrangements were immediately made to ensure that the arrangements in places sacred to Christianity should be entrusted to Christian religious dignitaries, and in places sacred to Islam to Moslem religious dignitaries.

In view of the continuation of heavy bombardment by the Syrians on our villages in the north, the constant danger to the lives of men, women and children, and the grievous damage that was being done to the villages, we were compelled to act in order to silence the Syrian posts on the Golan and Bashan mountains.

On Saturday, June 10, the Syrian heights were in our hands and the bases for aggression, which had threatened the villages in the north, hailing down damage and destruction upon them for nineteen years for the purpose of turning them into heaps of rubble, had been liquidated.

During the fighting, our forces destroyed some 450 enemy planes, and hundreds of tanks. The enemies' forces were routed in battle. Many ran for their lives or were taken prisoner. This is the first time since the establishment of the State that the threat to our security has been removed at one and the same time in the Sinai Peninsula, the Gaza Strip, Jerusalem, the West Bank and the northern border.

In these battles the soldiers of the Israel Defense Forces fought, in their tens of thousands, with indescribable courage and heroism. They showed infinite devotion and comradely loyalty, resourcefulness and skill. Officers advanced at the head of their units and threw themselves upon strong fortifications. Many fell or were wounded leading their soldier comrades. Soldiers risked their lives to extricate their comrades and save them from death and captivity. It was by virtue of this dedication and fraternity of fighters that we won. Happy the people that has such an army.

From this rostrum I wish to congratulate the Members of the Government, the Minister of Defense, the Chief of Staff, the senior officers in the field and at headquarters, the commanders of corps and formations, and all the officers and men of the Israel Defense Forces on land, at sea and in the air. I am confident that the entire nation and all the forces will welcome my special greeting to the air force, and to its present and previous commanders.

Parallel with the developments in the security arena, we were confronted with a struggle on the international political scene. During the first days of the crisis, from Independence Day until Thursday, May 18, the entry of the Egyptian forces into Sinai was described in various capitals as an act of demonstrative show.

Egypt's demand for the withdrawal of the -international force was hastily fulfilled by the Secretary-General of the United Nations, without the Advisory Committee on the UN force being asked to approve this step in advance or the matter being submitted for discussion at the UN Security Council.

With the removal of the UN force, the international struggle grew tenser. Nevertheless, no international institution took action to prevent the approaching aggression or to get rid of the concentration of Egyptian forces on Israel's border. It is possible that the impotence of the international organization encouraged Nasser to persevere in his aggressive path and to block the Strait of Tiran. Even after the blocking of the Strait, the Security Council did not call upon Egypt to annul the blockade, although several of its members described this act as illegal and dangerous.

When the Strait was blocked, the United States and Britain started political action for the purpose of safeguarding freedom of passage. Israel ascribed importance to this international action. We regarded it as useful that international opposition to one of the central manifestations of Egyptian aggression should be intensified.

However, it soon transpired that Nasser was not content with closing the Strait of Tiran, and that his aim was the destruction of Israel. Thus, while the Powers were seeking a solution to the problem of the Strait in accordance with international law, the fighting began.

During the three weeks that preceded the fighting, the eyes of the world were opened, perhaps for the first time, to the real nature of the Arab policy of hostility and the true aggressive intentions of the Egyptian ruler, against which we had warned the world for many years.

In my Knesset speech of May 29, I noted that we had been greatly encouraged by the growing support and sympathy that we enjoyed throughout the world. During the days that followed, this support and sympathy became a powerful flood which encompassed states, governments and peoples, and testified how widely the vision of Israel's resurgence had become a part of the pattern of world culture in our generation. In the days that preceded the battles, the world's anxiety for Israel's survival became a mighty manifestation, which strengthened our position and will fortify us in the political struggle that lies ahead.

I have no intention in this place to refute lying propaganda, but, for the sake of historic truth, I want to repeat again, in the most categorical fashion, that when Israel fought for her life, her sons fought alone. In this war of defense we were not assisted by any military force of any country in any form whatsoever.

I must point out that, throughout the period when Egypt and her allies were preparing for war and during the fighting itself, there was one Great Power which not only did not denounce their aggressive policy, but even helped the aggressors by political means. On Saturday, June 10, 1967, the Soviet Union announced the rupture of diplomatic relations with Israel, and she was followed by Czechoslovakia and Bulgaria.

Perhaps there is not much practical advantage to be gained, but it is our international duty to ask the Soviet Union how, as a member of the United Nations, she reconciled her declared policy of settlement of international disputes by peaceful means with the bestowal of massive armaments and military equipment on States that have publicly declared their intention of using these armaments in order to destroy a sovereign State, and how her policy is compatible with open support for the aggressor during the fighting.

Perhaps the leaders of the Soviet Union will now realize that it is their duty to assist in the effort to establish true peace in the Middle East. In the last official contact between us, we expressed the hope that relations would

yet be maintained between our countries on the basis of a more profound understanding of Israel's problems on the part of the Soviet Union.

Mr. Speaker, Members of the Knesset:

When the State of Israel was born, nineteen years ago, the Arab armies tried to strangle it at birth. When the State successfully resisted them, armistice agreements were signed. In these agreements it was expressly stated, in the clearest terms, that their purpose was to serve as a transitional stage on the road to peace. And indeed, that was the attitude which Israel adopted towards them.

However, in the course of the years we found that our neighbors regard these agreements as an expedient for gaining time in order to prepare for renewed aggression, with the aim of destroying Israel. The United Nations chose to ignore this attitude on the part of the Arabs. The UN Charter obligates member-states not to use force or the threat of force, and to solve disputes by peaceful means. Yet the United Nations refrained from condemning Arab hostility towards Israel. Thus for nineteen years, this unique situation, unparalleled in international relations, persisted.

All the nations of the world, their leaders and their representatives heard the incitement of the Arab leaders and the rattling of the swords that were entrusted to them, but they were silent.

To the nations of the world I want to say: Be under no illusion that the State of Israel is prepared to return to the situation that reigned up to a week ago. The State of Israel arose and continued to exist as a matter of right, and this nation has been compelled to fight and fight again for that right. Alone we fought for existence and our security; we are entitled to determine what the true and vital interests of our country, and how they shall be secured. The position that existed up till now shall never again return. The Land of Israel shall no longer be a no man's land, wide open to acts of sabotage and murder.

We have already explained to the nations of the world that we look, not backward, but forward - to peace.

We shall faithfully observe the cease-fire if it is observed by the other side.

Members of the Knesset:

A new situation has been created, which can serve as a starting-point in direct negotiations for a peace settlement with the Arab countries. The historic contribution which the people of the world, headed by the Great Powers, can make towards the establishment of peace in our area is clear and unmistakable. They must address their demands, not to Israel, which has sought peace since she came into being, but to the Arab States, which have turned the Middle East into a focus of tension and a hotbed of ceaseless hatred during the past two decades.,

Justice, logic and morality demand that, after those twenty years of impotence, the Powers should have the courage to tell the Arab States that the United Nations Charter obliges them, just as it obligates every other member-state, to solve disputes by peaceful means.

Today our area is at the crossroads. In one direction lie peace and true cooperation, resting upon the sincere desires of the peoples in the area and their true interests. In the other direction lies the danger of continued hostility and hatred because of the absence of stable peace.

The international community is faced not only with a moral test, but also with a test of its political sagacity. The sooner the arms race in the area is ended, the sooner steps are taken to bring peace nearer in the Middle East, the greater, perhaps, will be the contribution to the relaxation of general international tension.

To the Arab peoples I want to say: We did not take up arms in any joyful spirit. We acted because we had no alternative if we wanted to defend our lives and our rights. Just as you have a right to your countries, so we have a right to ours. The roots of the Jewish people in this country go back to primeval days. Throughout the generations, Israel in dispersion maintained its spiritual and material links with this country, it was never severed from it even when it went into exile.

Similarly, this Land has kept faith with us, it has not given itself to any stranger. This historic and spiritual right of ours has been confirmed by international law and forged on the anvil of reality. Today the entire world realizes that no force can uproot us from this Land.

There is no parallel in the annals of the nations to this unique bond between our people and its Land. Perhaps the fact that we have successfully survived the three wars that have been forced upon us will finally convince those who refuse to recognize this fundamental truth that our ties with this Land are deeper than the sea, because without it our people cannot live.

In these days, when false hopes for the destruction of Israel have been shattered, perhaps the Arab leaders will think again, perhaps they will consider the extensive suffering and losses which they have caused to their peoples - and which we, too, regret.

Perhaps they will realize the valuable resources that have been squandered on weapons of war instead of being utilized for economic and social progress, perhaps they will ponder on the blessings that can flow to all the peoples of the area from sincere cooperation among them. Only through such cooperation will the Middle East take its rightful place in the total picture of world culture and human progress.

Mr. Speaker, Members of the Knesset:

When the emergency reached its climax, the Government was expanded and a Government of National Unity established. I should like to state that the expanded Government, including the Cabinet Committee on Security Affairs, has stood, and continues to stand, the test of national leadership. I am confident that, in national unity, we shall meet the tests that lie in store for us, ready for the political struggle and always seeking peace.

May the coming days deepen still further that wonderful feeling of devotion, unity and spiritual exaltation, the bond between future generations and the unity of the entire House of Israel.

Israel has emerged stronger than before from the test of fire and blood. Faithful to herself and looking with confidence to the future, with the aid of the Rock and Redeemer of Israel, this nation shall yet dwell in safety.