

# Political and Military Situation

## Introduction

After months of growing anxiety and frustration, impotently witnessing the increasing armament of Egypt and its closer relations with Syria and Jordan, Israel took the military initiative on 29 October 1956. In a brilliant campaign lasting little more than one hundred hours, the IDF smashed all Egypt's units in the Sinai Peninsula, to take up positions ten miles east of the Suez Canal. The Sinai Campaign was accompanied, in its first phase, by a joint Anglo-French ultimatum directed at Egypt and Israel, subsequently by the Anglo-French bombardment of Egypt's airfields, and ultimately by the ill-fated landing of forces near Port Said. On the other hand, the operation was condemned from the outset by the governments of the U.S.A. and the U.S.S.R. In the early hours of 7 November 1956 the Soviet government published the texts of notes sent to the governments of Great Britain, France and Israel, demanding in peremptory terms an immediate ceasefire and the withdrawal of all foreign forces from Egyptian soil. The note to Israel was accompanied by the withdrawal of the Soviet ambassador and the breaking off of diplomatic relations, and was interpreted by many as a threat of direct Soviet military action against Israel.

All the same, Ben-Gurion proceeded, on the evening of November 7, to deliver a victory speech to the Knesset. Neither then nor for many years thereafter did Israeli sources reveal the nature of previous contacts and mutual commitments, not only with the French but also with the British government. Nor did Ben-Gurion reveal his concern at the Soviet threat, which had caused him that morning to dispatch his Foreign Minister, Golda Meir, and the Director-General of the Ministry of Defense, Shimon Peres, on a secret mission to France to gauge French reaction to the Soviet threat.

In a rare show of almost total unanimity (excepting only three Communist MKs), Ben-Gurion's statement was accepted by the Knesset.

## Sitting 182 of the Third Knesset

7 November 1956 (3 Kislev 5717)

**The Speaker, J. Sprinzak:** I hereby open the Knesset sitting. I give the floor to the Prime Minister and Minister of Defense.

**The Prime Minister and Minister of Defense, D. Ben-Gurion:** Mr. Speaker, Knesset Members, the revelation at Sinai which has been revived these past few days by the IDF's heroic action is the focal point of our fortification, our security and our internal welfare as well as of our external relations in the world and the Middle East.

As you know, after a lightning strike lasting less than seven days, two days ago our army completed clearing the Sinai Peninsula and the Gaza Strip of enemy forces, from Ras-al-Nakab facing Eilat to Solomon's Gulf, which was known as Sharm el-Sheikh till now, to the southern coast of the Red Sea Straits, and from the Eilat-Rafah line in the north to the Suez Canal and its southernmost bay, an area of almost sixty thousand square kilometers (almost three times the size of Israel). This was the greatest and most splendid military campaign in the history of our people and one of the most wonderful campaigns in the history of the world.

Our army did not violate the territory of Egypt nor did it attempt to do so, and I hope that in future too the Egyptian tyrant will not force us to contravene the command given us when we left Egypt 3,300 years ago—not to return to it. Our operation was restricted solely to the Sinai Peninsula, and I will briefly describe its motives and objectives.

Approximately three weeks ago, on October 15, I submitted to the Knesset a review of our security problems, which had deteriorated ever since the Czech deal, which sent enormous quantities of heavy arms to Egypt. Only one week ago our army discovered the alarming quantity and excellent quality of these abundant Soviet weapons—only part of which, naturally, was sent to the Sinai Peninsula—and concerning which neither we, nor the Egyptian tyrant nor his peace-loving friends in Czechoslovakia had any doubts as to its intended use. In any event, neither the suppliers nor the recipients of these weapons meant that they should fall into our hands, but rather that they should be the instrument of our downfall.

The Suez crisis, which broke out in recent months and caused a furore throughout the world, did not alarm us; not because we are not interested in the freedom of navigation in this international waterway, but because our freedom of navigation had been arbitrarily and rudely impaired by Egypt's rulers several years ago, and they continued to impair this right after the U.N. resolution of 1951; that resolution was rudely and impudently violated by the Egyptian tyrant without the U.N...even trying to ensure that the resolution was enforced...

The U.S., Great Britain and, needless to say, the U.S.S.R. preferred all that time to appease the fascist tyrant in Egypt rather than enforce international law and honor the U.N. and its Charter, as long as this could be done solely at Israel's expense. Only after the action of the Egyptian tyrant had finally endangered the rights and interests of other countries...and the world had aroused itself did the Government of Is-

rael modestly state its concern regarding the assurance of its navigation rights in the international waterway, and world public opinion supported this claim. And even though the Security Council, in its decision of October 13, reaffirmed freedom of navigation without discrimination, whether overt or covert, the Egyptian ruler announced that no Israeli ship would be allowed to pass through the Canal.

The damage done by the Egyptian tyrant and the danger this involved for us was not restricted to depriving us of our navigation rights in the Suez Canal. For Israel's economy and economic future, freedom of navigation in the Red Sea to and from Eilat is no less—if not far more—vital than freedom of navigation in Suez. Israel's naval trade began in effect in the Red Sea 3,000 years ago, at the time of King Solomon, and Eilat was the first Jewish port in the time of the kings of Judah, and until the middle of the sixth century A.D., i.e., until 1,400 years ago. There was Jewish independence on the island of Yotva, in the southern part of the Straits of Eilat, which was liberated two days ago by the IDF. That island, called Tiran today, guards the passage from the Red Sea in the south to Eilat. In his book on the wars between the Persians and the Byzantines, Procopius, a sixth century Greek historian who was born in Caesaria in Palestine, describes the island of Yotva (now known as Tiran) as follows: "There the Hebrews sit from ancient times and govern themselves, and only when Justinian came to power in our time did they come under the rule of the Romans," i.e., the Byzantines....

This island remained desolate for centuries until recently, when a few years ago the Egyptians seized it and stationed soldiers there to disturb Israeli shipping in the Straits, while on the coast facing the island, at the site known until two days ago as Sharm el-Sheikh and which is now called the Gulf of Solomon, they stationed troops armed with powerful cannon capable of hitting any ship going through the narrow passage.

The Egyptian tyrant did not limit himself to placing a naval blockade on Israel in Suez and the Red Sea and organizing an economic boycott of Israel throughout the world. In all the Arab countries he organized special bands of murderers which crossed the borders from time to time to terrorize people working in the fields and dwelling in their homes in Israel. Gamal Abdul Nasser said over and over again that Egypt was at war with Israel, and did not conceal his principal intention of attacking Israel at the first opportune moment and wiping it off the face of the earth. It is no coincidence that amongst the large quantities of booty our army found in the Sinai desert, the first-rate and luxurious equipment of the Egyptian officers included a translation into Arabic of Hitler's *Mein Kampf*.

Since I made my statement in the Knesset three weeks ago something happened which increased the danger we were in and obliged us to take vigorous and immediate steps:

After the elections in Jordan, in which Egyptian bribery played a decisive role, a pro-Egyptian majority was elected and a tripartite military pact was immediately made between Egypt, Jordan and Syria, the armies of those three countries being placed under Egypt's command. The objective was clear: to fight against Israel and destroy it. The Egyptian *fedayeen*, who had been ordered by the Egyptian tyrant to refrain from their murderous attacks on Israel during the Suez crisis, were activated again, as soon as it seemed to Gamal Abdul Nasser that the crisis had died down, and one *fedayeen* group was discovered in the area of Sde Boker; another, which was caught at Nazereth, had been sent to our country from the north by the Egyptian military attache in Lebanon; our fields were mined at Nitzana by military sappers from Egypt and twenty-three Jewish soldiers were wounded.

There was no doubt that the stranglehold around us was tightening, and the Egyptian tyrant would not recoil from anything liable to overthrow us. We had to take effective defensive measures urgently.

First of all, on the basis of the authorization granted us by the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, we mobilized several reserve battalions to guard the eastern border against a surprise attack by Syria or Jordan or both of them. We mobilized a larger reserve force, particularly the armored corps, along the southern border. The Knesset Members know that there is a basic organizational difference between our defense forces and those of the Arabs. Whereas their entire military force is continually mobilized and consists solely of a regular army, Israel's defense rests mainly on its reserves and our regular forces are small, dealing primarily with mobilizing new recruits and training them to guard military installations.

When we began mobilizing our reserves I received two messages from the President of the U.S. expressing concern at this. In my reply of October 29 I reminded him of his constant efforts over the past year on behalf of peace in the region, which had met with every possible support on our part, while the only person who had foiled those efforts had been the Egyptian ruler. I described the constantly-deteriorating situation and the Egyptian tyrant's expansionist aspirations and arms buildup, undermining the independence of the other Arab countries and, in particular, his clear intention of destroying Israel by establishing the military alliance with Jordan and Syria under Egyptian command, by renewing the activity of the *fedayeen*, etc. My reply ended with the following words: "With the Iraqi army on the Iraq-Jordan border, the establishment of a joint command for Egypt, Jordan and Syria, the decisive increase of Egypt's influence in Jordan, and the renewed penetration of Egyptian gangs into Israel, it would be a dereliction of duty on my Gov-

ernment's part were it to fail to take every possible step to ensure that the declared policy of the Arab rulers to destroy Israel by force would fail. My Government has asked the nation in Israel to be alert and calm. I am sure that with your rich military experience you will be able to assess the great and fateful danger in which we find ourselves."

That night several of our units set out to put an end to the nests of murderers incorporated within the Egyptian army as well as to the planning and organizational bases of the gangs of murderers, and to eradicate the forces from which those bands came. In these clashes the Egyptians used their air force against us and fierce battles were fought in the Sinai desert. After seven days the entire Egyptian military force had been driven out of the Sinai Peninsula. As I said before, our army was given strict orders not to cross the Suez Canal, not to violate Egyptian territory and to remain solely within the confines of the Sinai Peninsula.

Military historians will study and analyze the IDF's wonderful campaign, which lasted only a few days and took place in an immense desert, facing an enemy which was armed from head to toe with the best and most modern equipment of the Soviet Bloc and several other countries. Only after the conquest of the Gaza Strip, Abu-Ageila, El-Arish, Nehal, Mitleh and the Gulf of Eilat did we realize what vast quantities of the most up-to-date weapons were in the Egyptians' possession, the heavy arms, the tanks and cannon, the sophisticated communications systems, the armored vehicles, the supplies and uniforms, which were far superior to ours in quality and quantity. Although we had known about the mighty stream of heavy arms of every kind reaching the Egyptian tyrant during the year, we did not have an accurate picture of the huge amounts of heavy weapons and the excellent quality of the weapons and the equipment. The huge booty which has fallen into our hands proves beyond a doubt that the Egyptian tyrant squeezed the last penny from the Arab nation in Egypt in order to grant every benefit and a life of luxury to the army, upon which his strength and rule rested.

But all the masses of first-rate weapons and equipment were of no avail to the Egyptian army, because the army had no spirit. This fulfilled the prophecy of the Prophet Isaiah: "The Lord hath mingled a perverse spirit in the midst thereof, and they have caused Egypt to err in every work thereof, as a drunken man staggereth in his vomit. Neither shall there be any work for Egypt, which the head or tail, branch or rush, may do." To tell the truth, I must add that there were some Egyptian commanders who fought bravely and persistently, and they deserve honor and praise.

There were about three divisions facing us: one in the Gaza Strip, one in the open spaces of the Sinai Peninsula, primarily near El-Arish and Abu-Ageila. There were several more units, also lavishly equipped and armed, scattered throughout the length and breadth of the Sinai

Peninsula, at Ras-el-Nakab, Kunteila, Tamad, Kuseima, Jebel Libneh, Nehal, A-Tur, Ras-Natzrani and Sharm el-Sheikh. These three divisions together with their services numbered more than 30,000 men. During the fighting Egyptian reinforcements arrived, more than two brigades, amounting to 10,000 men. This mighty army was equipped with hundreds of Czech and British tanks, superior armored vehicles and heavy cannon of every kind. It was supported by an air force equipped with Vampire, Meteor and Mig planes. As you know, the Egyptian navy was also deployed, reaching Haifa in a well-equipped destroyer, which will constitute a welcome addition to the poorly-equipped Israeli navy.

On the first night of action Kunteila, Ras-el-Nakab, near Eilat, and Kuseima were conquered, at four in the morning. The next day Tamad, El-Basos and El-Ofra in the heart of Sinai were taken. On October 31 Bir-Hasneh was taken without resistance, as well as Nehal, a fortified position. After fierce fighting, Abu-Ageila was conquered. On November 1 all the positions around Rafah and El-Gafgafa (on the road between Nitzana and Ismailiya), as well as the first outpost in the environs of El-Arish, were captured.

Early in the morning of November 2 El-Arish was conquered, after bitter fighting. Three hours later Gaza was taken without any resistance. The most serious resistance was encountered that day at Khan-Yunis.

On November 3 several important points on the western coast of the Gulf of Eilat—Dahab and Ras-Natzrani—were captured. In effect, the entire Sinai Peninsula was in our hands on that day, apart from a small bay on the Red Sea coast facing the island of Yotva (Sharm el-Sheikh), which was fortified with long-range cannon and equipped with an airfield. This last Egyptian outpost fell into our hands two days ago, on November 5, in the morning.

I know that this dry account is inadequate for the splendid tale of heroism which few people would have ever believed possible. I will say only that it was not a windfall. The campaign was planned in advance with two primary objectives: rapidity of execution and the minimization of losses. I note with deep satisfaction that both these aims were achieved beyond our expectations. In effect, the principal action was implemented within four days and our losses were few, approximately 150 dead. I know that it is not merely in numerical terms that we assess our casualties. Each one of our soldiers who fell in battle is irreplaceable. Let us stand to attention in memory of our heroic soldiers, in deep sorrow and with great pride.

(The Knesset Members honor the memory of the fallen by standing.)

We will always remember these young lions as exemplary soldiers with unlimited dedication and endless devotion, as fighting men who were deterred by no obstacle or difficulty. We send our love and esteem

to the parents of those who fell. Happy are the mothers who have borne such sons.

I know that I am expressing the feelings of all the inhabitants of Israel and of the entire Jewish people throughout the world when I say that our love and admiration go to the IDF, to those who fought on land, at sea and in the air. You have done very well, especially those of you in the General Staff, the Air Force, the paratroops, the armored corps and the infantry. The whole nation is proud of you. By your wisdom and heroism you have raised the standing of our nation in the world and have added a layer of safety and glory to the fortification of Israel. You have done something tremendous, something which surpasses any political or military significance; you have brought us nearer to the highest and most crucial moment in the ancient history of our people, to the site at which the Law was given, where our people was chosen to be a special people. Once again we see before our eyes the eternal verses from our Law which tell of the exodus from Egypt and the arrival of our forefathers in the Sinai desert: "For they were departed from Rephidim, and were come to the desert of Sinai, and had pitched in the wilderness; and there Israel camped before the mount. And Moses went up unto God, and the Lord called unto him out of the mountain saying, 'Thus shalt thou say to the house of Jacob, and tell the children of Israel; Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings, and brought you unto myself. Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine.'"

Knesset Members! I cannot conceal from you that these great and splendid days were also days of deep anxiety, for me, at any rate. Like anyone else in Israel, I knew the extent of the strength hidden within us, because it should be noted with great satisfaction that not only the IDF but the entire nation evinced courage and admirable emotional maturity during these days. The weak points did not escape me, however. I knew the enemy's power in the air, and just as I had no doubt as to who would win on the battlefield, I was deeply concerned about the fate of our towns and airfields. It was necessary to use special measures to avoid their bombardment, as far as possible. I am happy to note that our special measures worked well, and the "rear" hardly felt the war. Since the danger is not yet completely over, I am sure that no one will ask me to say what the special measures were....Once again, I note with satisfaction that the results were better than expected.

As we look back on those great events, whose true dimensions may be difficult to assess just now, I am obliged to fulfill an unpleasant duty...and say that we must not be lulled into a sense of false security. We live in a complex, quarrelsome world, where not only Blocs and countries are at odds with one another, but many countries have internal conflicts, and may sanction today what they condemned yesterday

and vice versa. Thus, there is no end to the tricks and ploys used by various politicians to conceal their intrigues, and we must be on our guard and...sharpen all our senses regarding what the future may bring.

As you know, a special session of the Security Council has been called to discuss the events in Sinai and the area of the Canal. We will not ask the U.N. now why the Assembly was not summoned so rapidly when the Arab countries invaded our country in 1948, as soon as our state was renewed. No nation in the world is more concerned about the principles of peace and justice embodied in the U.N. Charter than Israel, not only because those principles are our spiritual heritage from days of yore and reached the entire civilized world via us, but because the entire future of our people depends to a great extent on the rule of peace and justice in the world.

The constitution of the U.N. states that the resolutions passed by the Assembly are merely recommendations, and every sovereign state is entitled to propose an alternative resolution to that of the majority. The special Assembly has only begun to operate, and will sit for several weeks as a regular Assembly, and we will have to determine our position regarding questions which will arise from time to time and various political combinations which could be made in certain circumstances. For the moment, however, we must clarify our stand on seven issues, and we must bring them before world public opinion with all the moral force and resolute conviction we can muster.

A. The Armistice Agreement with Egypt is dead and buried, and will not be resurrected. It was done to death after the Egyptian tyrant infringed it for several years, broke its principles and objectives and disregarded the decisions and Charter of the U.N. By repeatedly declaring that there was a state of war between Egypt and Israel, Nasser distorted the essence and objective of the Armistice Agreement, because the first paragraph of that document states that it was drawn up in order to restore permanent peace. The Egyptian ruler used the agreement as a smoke-screen to conceal the murderous attacks against Israel's citizens and to disguise the cruel blockade of Israel on land, at sea and in the air. Nasser did not content himself with the *fedayeen* gangs which he organized in the areas under his rule, but operated and directed them against Israel in the other Arab countries too. Thus, the Armistice Agreement became a damaging and dangerous fiction which merely helped the Egyptian tyrant's destructive machinations. Any return to the Armistice Agreement means returning to murder, blockade and a boycott of Israel intended to bring about its complete destruction.

B. The armistice lines between us and Egypt died together with the agreement.

C. There is no dispute between Israel and the Egyptian people. King Farouk, and the tyrant Gamal Abdul Nasser after him, brought disaster on their people by making them engage in war against Israel. The

flight of the officers of the Egyptian army as well as of the thousands of its soldiers provides ample evidence of the fact that they had no interest in fighting Israel in an alien desert.

D. We do not seek the preservation of anarchy in our relations with Egypt, and we are willing to undertake negotiations for a stable peace, cooperation and good relations with Egypt, provided the negotiations are direct, without preconditions and without compulsion from either side. We hope that all truly peace-loving nations will support this desire of ours.

E. We are ready for negotiations of this kind with any of the other Arab countries. But as long as they maintain the Armistice Agreements, even if they are not prepared to establish permanent peace, Israel will also keep these agreements.

F. On no account will Israel agree that a foreign force, under whatever name, should be stationed within its territory or in territory under its control.

G. Israel will not fight Egypt or any Arab country unless it is attacked by them.

These are our policy guidelines in these stirring times.

Knesset Members, we may be confronting a difficult political struggle, and perhaps something more serious than that. We have undergone difficult experiences in the past, and were not deterred. We will not be infected by the insolence of the Arab rulers, but neither will we be discouraged by the bullies of the world....In our efforts to procure peace and justice in this region we expect to obtain the support of all men of good will and all lovers of peace throughout the world.

We will meet the coming days with fortitude and intelligence, recognizing the fact that right is on our side and that we are strong, without ignoring our natural and acknowledged association with the family of nations.

**The Speaker, J. Sprinzak:** The debate on the statement will be held at two o'clock. The sitting is closed.