

Introduction

Events moved quickly. During the night of May 22 and 23, between the opening of the debate on the Prime Minister's statement and its conclusion, while U Thant was en route to Cairo to plead with President Nasser, the latter announced the closure of the Straits of Tiran, at the entrance to the Gulf of Eilat. Encouraged by the unwonted, newly-found solidarity manifested by other Arab rulers, which some days later brought his hitherto despised archenemy, King Hussein, to Cairo to sign a mutual defense treaty, and infected by the war-like enthusiasm of some of the Egyptian pilots and officers, Nasser appears to have taken the decision on the spur of the moment. It is not clear whether he had consulted, or at least informed, the Soviets beforehand. That decision, in retrospect, must be considered as the point of no return on the slippery road to war.

Sitting 177 of the Sixth Knesset

23 May 1967 (13 Iyar 5727)

Jabbar Mu'adi (Israeli Druse Party): Mr. Speaker, distinguished Knesset, at this crucial time in the life of the Israeli nation, I would like first of all to send the warm wishes of the Israeli Druse Party and the Druse community in Israel to the soldiers of the IDF who are guarding the borders.

We believe in the ability of the IDF, which is actually and potentially the greatest deterrent force in the Middle East, and not only in the press and on the radio, as some claim. I therefore declare that the Druse community will place all its strength and capability at the disposal of the brave army. It is regrettable to hear of Nasser's decision to block the Straits of Tiran, which is tantamount to declaring war on Israel, a war which will inevitably end in the defeat of Israel's enemies.

I direct the following appeal to the three hundred thousand Arab citizens of the state: do not be misled by internal and external propaganda, because extremist action which will harm the country's interests will simultaneously harm anyone undertaking it, causing grave damage to himself and others. All Arab citizens must be loyal to the state and appreciate the benefits it has brought them, because the situation of the Arabs in Israel is better than that of the Arabs abroad...and, recogniz-

ing this, Arab youngsters should join the Army immediately. I say this primarily for the benefit of the Arabs themselves. I conclude by wishing the IDF complete victory.

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Z. Tzur (Ma'arach): Distinguished Speaker and Knesset, the advance of the Egyptian army from its bases at the rear towards our borders, and the withdrawal of the U.N. Force from its positions in the Sinai, the Gaza Strip and Sharm el-Sheikh after May 14, directly and openly threaten our borders and our security and bring war dangerously near.

Nasser's announcement this morning that he is closing the Straits to Israeli shipping constitutes another grave threat to our security, for not only can we not renounce our navigation rights...but the exit to the Red Sea is essential for our existence, and any restriction of our rights is a restriction of our sovereignty, our territory and our security. We must view this situation with the utmost gravity and responsibility. We must appeal to the Powers to use their influence to prevent the conflagration which might arise if Nasser is permitted to implement his aggressive threats and the situation is not restored to what it was before May 14.

Although we are confident of our strength and believe in our victory if we are put to the test, we still hope for peace, because we know that there has not yet been a good war, even for the victors, just as there has not been a bad peace, with the exception of the so-called Munich Peace, which led to the World War, the Holocaust and genocide. Nasser's hostility to Israel is not new. Although the Egyptian border has been relatively quiet since the Sinai Campaign, Nasser has never ceased to announce his intention of destroying Israel.

The bitter lessons of the history of mankind, and primarily the tragic experience of our nation, which ignored Hitler's pronouncements until it was too late, should have taught us to take heed of the Egyptian dictator's statements about his objective of destroying Israel. But we would not abandon the assumption that peace, however shaky, offered a faint hope of a change for the better.

May 14, with the movement towards our border of the Egyptian army, created a new situation....Nasser's statements and threats were suddenly far more ominous than in the past....This was no mere demonstrative act, but a danger greater and more real even than that prior to the Sinai Campaign....Now, like Hitler in the past, Nasser has suddenly ended all the U.N. arrangements. Now there is a direct and open threat on our borders, on points which are essential for our security, and the Straits are closed to Israeli navigation.

Our region has always been a volatile one, not necessarily or solely because of Israel...but because of the competition between the Powers for areas of influence, between the Arab countries for supremacy in the region and Nasser's struggle for dominance in the Arab world. We are not going to pull anyone else's chestnuts out of the fire for them. We our-

selves are the chestnuts....We must not let our existence and security be endangered by this competition between the Powers....We do not seek the charity of the world and have never asked the soldiers of another country to fight on our behalf....We did not rely on the U.N. Force to defend our existence, but it represented a guarantee that the status quo would be maintained, as would peace on our border with Egypt and our freedom of navigation in the Straits, as determined in the U.N. resolutions.

We wonder why the U.N. Secretary-General withdrew the U.N. Force so hastily and without consulting the Assembly or informing Israel, just when the situation in the region became tense....It was the pressure exerted by the Powers on Israel in the past which obliged us to withdraw from the Sinai, thereby reinforcing Nasser's belief that he would be able to act aggressively towards us without encountering any reaction from them. But they undertook at the time to ensure that the status quo, peace and freedom of navigation were preserved.

May 14 marked the twentieth anniversary of the special session of the U.N. where Gromyko made a remarkable and surprising speech on behalf of the U.S.S.R., saying, amongst other things: "We must show concern for the pressing needs of a nation which has suffered so dreadfully because of the war caused by Hitler's Germany. That is the obligation of the U.N. In view of the necessity of evincing concern for the needs of the Jews who are now without homes or means of subsistence, the Soviet delegation believes that it is necessary, in this context, to draw the General Assembly's attention to the following important information: the experience of the past, and especially of the Second World War, has revealed that no West European country could defend that nation's rights or even its existence against the violence of the Hitlerites and their allies. That is an unpleasant fact, but must be acknowledged... and it explains the aspiration of the Jews to establish a country of their own. It would be unfair not to take that fact into account and to deny the right of the Jewish people to realize that aspiration."...

Has the Holocaust, its results and dangers already been forgotten? And today, twenty years after the establishment of the State of Israel, which was and is the one and only refuge for Jewish refugees, is it no longer the duty of the U.S.S.R. to act with other countries in order to prevent acts of hostility against Israel and attempts to destroy it...?

For the security of Israel...and the preservation of peace it is necessary to stop the acts of terrorism and the guerrilla warfare against us on the Syrian and other borders...and to move the Egyptian troops back into Egypt. Above all, it must be made clear that closing the Straits to Israeli navigation is tantamount to attacking us, and on no account will Israel tolerate that.

It is true that the Israeli nation is not flustered by the situation which has been created, trusting in its strength and that of the IDF....Every

man and woman in Israel knows that we are fighting for our existence, that there can be no retreat, and this explains the courageous and firm stand of the Israeli public....We know that this is an emergency, that great danger confronts us, and we must comport ourselves accordingly....The hearts of us all are with those who are guarding our borders and defending our existence. We will stand united in the battle for peace against hostility and aggression, and will fight for our fate responsibly and determinedly.

E. Rimalt (Gahal): Mr. Speaker, distinguished Knesset, this debate has proved what we knew already, namely, that the entire House and the nation is united in recognizing the gravity of the situation...and the need to stand firm against any aggressor who seeks to destroy Israel and harm its citizens. There is no doubt in this country, over and above all differences of opinion...that national unity blossoms magically overnight in our hour of need...and will fortify us in this national testing time....The Jewish people recoils from war and bloodshed. We have shed too much blood on the altars of world history...but no one in this nation doubts that if the enemy forces us to defend ourselves we will do so firmly and valiantly.

Even when one has lived through a great deal and experienced three wars...it is difficult not to be moved each time anew by this people, its young men, its youngsters, its courage, its steadfastness, its internal national discipline. Our whole nation is mobilized. Our young men know that they are not going on a picnic or a ramble. The young wives and elderly mothers send them off with victory wishes, not with tears or despair or weeping but with congratulations, because the wives and mothers share in the national undertaking....It is against this younger generation that so much criticism has been levelled by the older generation...without listening to what it had to say. This generation has not let us down....

At this grave moment we must see the situation as it really is....Failure to do so...is potentially disastrous. A mistaken assessment of the situation derives from illusions which, however pure the thought behind them, are no less dangerous than illusions deriving from negligence or lack of faith....Just a year ago the Prime Minister gave an over-optimistic review of the foreign affairs and defense situation...claiming to see signs of a "new spirit" among some Arab leaders....Our party group warned of putting a mistaken interpretation on the situation....Our misgivings have been borne out by events....Was Egypt made ready for war overnight? Was the decision taken only yesterday? A month ago? No one can deny that over the years the Egyptian leader has been consistent in declaring his intention of destroying Israel, even though there may have been ups and downs in the priority accorded to this aim....

The Prime Minister said yesterday that he regarded the solution to the problem as being in the restoration of the situation to what it was before the Egyptian troop movements....We must not delude ourselves—there can be no return to the previous situation. Today the choice is between respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of countries, the full adherence to the Armistice Agreements by our enemies and acknowledging that the U.N. Charter applies to Israel too, including Israel-Arab relations, or the existing situation, which will inevitably lead to escalation and deterioration, i.e., conflagration.

What has happened is that the Egyptians have proved that Nasser's timetable is not as various commentators would have it....He is prepared to bring the clash with Israel forward to today or tomorrow. The U.N. Force does not exist, neither as a defensive force—which it never was—nor as a symbol of Egypt's agreement that there will be no infiltration or terrorism. He has the Straits of Tiran. There is no freedom of navigation. The Tripartite Declaration, whatever its value may have been in the past, no longer exists, at least not as it did twelve or even six months ago. The Egyptian and Syrian troop dispositions would not exist without the assurance of the full support of one of the Powers.

We cannot prevent war, however much we would like to. In the face of logic, we must hope and pray that war will not break out, though at every moment we must be ready to repel aggression and defend ourselves. But it is not in our power to prevent it. Only we can and must defend ourselves. Only the Powers can prevent war. The U.S. is committed to the preservation of world peace....I would like other Powers to join it....

At this time we send greetings to our sons and brothers who are guarding the borders or are ready to go to their posts at any moment....We send encouragement to the wives and mothers. We must appeal to the Jewish people, telling it that the Jewish state—the sovereign, concrete expression of the nation, the remnant of the Holocaust, the Jewish homeland—is in danger. The spiritual identification of world Jewry with our existence and our fate is the most important help they can give us....At this time the leaders and the nation must have the highest personal qualities: the ability to make decisions, to distinguish between what is and is not relevant, and to evince the capacity for caution and the courage to act. I regret to say that to date we have not noticed these characteristics in the Eshkol Government. I will conclude by repeating that we must hope and pray that, in the face of logic and reality, war will be averted, but we must be ready at any moment to repel the enemy's aggression.

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The Prime Minister and Minister of Defense, L. Eshkol: Mr. Speaker, distinguished Knesset, I apologize for the fact that you had to interrupt the sitting on my account, but the times are not completely normal.

I will speak briefly, for at this crucial time I have no intention of replying in detail to everything that was said here. Furthermore, to be quite frank, I was unable to hear everything that was said, though not because I was not interested. What I did hear, and the interparty consultations which were held today, have led me to conclude that the Knesset is united. The events of the last twenty-four hours oblige us to add a short statement referring to one topic only.

This morning the President of Egypt issued a statement regarding his intention of closing the international waterway through the Straits of Tiran which links the Gulf of Eilat with the Red Sea to ships bearing the Israeli flag as well as to other ships carrying cargo of a strategic nature.

Distinguished Knesset, any obstruction of freedom of navigation in the Gulf and the Straits is a grave violation of international freedom and the sovereign rights of other nations and an act of aggression against Israel.

As the Knesset knows, since 1957 various governments, including those of the principal maritime nations, have declared their intention of implementing their rights to free navigation in the Straits of Tiran and the Gulf of Eilat. During the last few days Israel has been in close contact with those governments....In consequence, I can say that international support for those rights is serious and quite widespread.

What is to be tested here is a clear and official international commitment on which international law and order depends. Thus, this is a fateful moment not only for Israel but for the whole world. In view of this situation, I hereby appeal to the Powers to act immediately to implement the right to free navigation to our southern port, a right which belongs to every country, without discrimination.

The Government of Israel will adhere to the policy it announced at the U.N. General Assembly on 1 March 1957. Since that statement was made, freedom of navigation in the Straits and the Gulf has been established for ten years as a deeply-rooted international reality, as reflected in hundreds of ships sailing under dozens of flags and creating a widespread and developing cultural and communications network.

The illegal statement by the Egyptian President supplements the lawless behavior Egypt has displayed for many years by closing the Suez Canal, in contravention of its undertaking to permit freedom of navigation there to the ships of all nations.

Members of the Knesset, yesterday I called on the nations of the region to respect one another's territorial integrity, political sovereignty and the rights of all the countries of the region. I announced Israel's readiness to share in reducing tension and strengthening peace in our region.

Any base attempt to block the navigation of a member-state of the U.N. will constitute a dangerous precedent having grave repercussions

for international relations and freedom of navigation. The latest development reveals the dangerous significance of Egypt's actions. I call on the world to display practical and effective responsibility in preserving the peace.

I will submit details of the situation to the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, where they will be discussed.

The Knesset debate has revealed the nation's unity in facing the future. It is with unity, alertness and confidence that we will face the days to come.