

Prime Minister's Report—Debate

Sitting 3 of the Provisional Council of State

3 June 1948 (25 Iyar 5708)
JNF Building, Tel Aviv

M. Hartman (General Zionists): On behalf of the General Zionist Party, I would like to make the following statement: After May 15, when the connection with Jerusalem became more difficult, though the city was not completely cut off, we were assured that efforts would be made to bring members of the Council of State from Jerusalem to Tel Aviv. That has not yet been done, however, despite the fact that during that time people went to and from Jerusalem. We hereby express our disappointment at the failure of the efforts of which we were assured. We are particularly embittered by the fact that not even the promise to bring the Minister of the Interior, Yitzhak Gruenbaum, has been kept. His absence from the Government and the Ministry must pose considerable difficulties as well as discrediting our reputation. While we are prepared to serve as temporary substitutes, we feel it necessary to raise these issues so that the Council may be informed and the matter be set right in the near future.

The Prime Minister, D. Ben-Gurion: I will try to give a brief review of three fronts—military, political and domestic. It will be brief due to lack of time and the fact that what I can tell you most of you know, and what is not known is best left unsaid. I will start with the most burning issue—the military front.

The invasion of the country began before the termination of the Mandate, and was given covert aid and overt patronage by the Mandatory Government. The invading forces—this is no secret—received many of their weapons from the British Government. We have reason to believe that their military stratagems and operations were undertaken in collaboration with the Mandatory Government. Before the termination of the Mandate this was camouflaged, and even the neighboring Arab governments did not openly accept responsibility for the gangs, while the Mandatory Government tried to display neutrality. But upon the termination of the Mandate there was an open invasion by the regular armies of the five neighboring countries—Lebanon, Syria, Transjordan, Iraq and Egypt—whose populations are almost forty times that of the Jewish population of this country. This alone indicates the gravity of the situation. Furthermore, these armies were equipped, with British

help, with large quantities of modern heavy weaponry: planes, artillery and tanks....

Initially, this was intended to be a lightning operation, with the object of strangling the infant State of Israel. According to the plans which have fallen into our hands, Haifa was to have been captured on May 20, with Tel Aviv and Jerusalem to follow on May 25. That same day King Abdullah of Transjordan was to have entered Jerusalem, to be crowned king of his extended kingdom.

If we review what we have been through during the past three weeks, we cannot say that the danger is past. On the contrary, it may increase in the days to come. In addition to the overt aid given the invading armies by the former Mandatory Government, there is British participation in the embargo which the neighboring countries are attempting to impose on the State of Israel. We have also been informed, indirectly (because of the incompetence of the British officials in Israel, who are not aware of the establishment of the state, only of the existence of Jewish mayors—the British Consul in Haifa asked the Jewish mayor of the town to inform the Consulate of urgent matters), that if Amman is bombed again, the RAF will destroy any Jewish plane in Palestine's skies, because Amman is the nerve center of British aviation in the entire region.

There is still room for concern regarding the future, although our recent past can be viewed as a significant achievement. If we focus on the short period since the termination of the Mandate and the political and military goals which the invading countries set themselves, we can say that on the political level they suffered a setback and on the military one a substantial defeat. Their evil plans to effect a quick invasion from the north, south and east and destroy the State of Israel in a few days were overturned. The State of Israel exists, and its destruction is further away today than it was three weeks ago. Israel's army now controls more territory than it did three weeks ago. We hold the entire area of the State of Israel as delineated by the U.N., as well as several important districts outside it, the two most important being Western Galilee and almost the entire road connecting Tel Aviv with Jerusalem—apart from two small but crucial sections, where traffic to Jerusalem is still being disrupted including all the surrounding areas from Sha'ar Ha-gan to Jerusalem on both sides of the road, in addition to important parts of the road in the foothills.

The new parts of Jerusalem, with a few exceptions, are in our hands, although we cannot ignore our losses in that sector. After a heroic stand, which will remain forever in the annals of Jewish military history, the Etzion Bloc fell. And after a possibly even more heroic stand, the handful of Jews in the Old City surrendered, after having been under siege for many months. The Old City of Jerusalem is now in the hands of the enemy.

After a careful assessment of the balance of strength and the situation on the fronts, we can say that in military matters, perhaps even more than in political ones, we cannot speak with certainty of the future, even when it is only a few weeks ahead. The fall of the Old City of Jerusalem might not be permanent. We have a basis for hoping, since the New City of Jerusalem is almost totally Jewish, that in the not too distant future the Old City will also be in Jewish hands.

I will not go into detail with regard to the battles which have been fought. They are continuing, and are more or less known to everyone in the country, as well as anyone in the world who reads newspapers. Special mention should be made of the harsh battles which have taken place in the Jordan Valley. Tribute is due not only to the valor of the Army, but particularly, perhaps, to the determined settlers who, few in number and almost unarmed, fought off an enemy equipped with planes, artillery, tanks and armored vehicles. The danger has not yet passed in that area, just as it has not passed anywhere else in the country. Yet there, as elsewhere, we now have the upper hand.

We must also note one of the most courageous battles in our history, and perhaps in the history of the world, one marked by heroism and suffering—the battle for Jewish Jerusalem. The inhabitants were cut off from the rest of the country, and threatened with thirst and starvation. They were bombarded mercilessly and inhumanely by day and by night, with a complete and cynical disregard for the sanctity of a city regarded as holy by Christians and Moslems as well as by Jews. The bombardment and shelling by Arab hirelings of the British Government, using British artillery and planes, continues. The Anglican Church, which is responsible to no small extent for this barbaric attack on Jerusalem, maintains a significant silence, while the Jewish city stands heroically firm. The people of Jerusalem know that the State of Israel is behind them, and that our finest sons, from every corner of the country, will give their lives to free the city. Our ancient psalm, "By the rivers of Babylon," is no mere empty phrase but a fire which burns in the heart of the nation and its fighting youth. I cannot yet give you the details of the present situation, for obvious reasons, but there is a chance that the siege of Jerusalem will come to an end. A durable tie with Jerusalem, extending to the road as well as the surrounding area, is being opened by a battery of Jewish soldiers.

During the past three weeks we managed not only to survive the lightning strike and prevent the destruction of the state, something which was certain according to the governments of the Arabs and Bevin, but also to take the offensive most of the time. At the outset of hostilities I said that although this war was one of defense for us—we did not want it, it was forced upon us and we were merely defending ourselves—we did not undertake to conduct it by defensive means and

would take the offensive as far as possible, refusing to restrict our attacks to the borders of Palestine.

Our army has done its work well. We are attacking the Arab Triangle. We are at the gates of Jenin. We are attacking Tulkarm and Nablus is trembling. We have attacked and captured Western Galilee. We attacked enemy concentrations across the border in Syria and Lebanon. We issued our first warning to the invaders to cease their boasts that the war would take place within the borders of Palestine and in the skies above it when our Air Force bombed Amman, Abdullah's capital. I read in today's papers that Nukrashi Pasha has complained that we did not display the same respect for the U.N. mediator as the Egyptians did. They told their Air Force not to attack Tel Aviv while Count Bernadotte was here. We, on the other hand, bombed Amman while he was there.

The distinguished Pasha's statements were not very precise. We bombed Amman just before Count Bernadotte's arrival. Moreover, attempts were made to prevent him observing the performance of the Jewish Air Force in the country where the Arabs regard themselves as being safe. That was only the beginning. In the past weeks not only has the initiative been in our hands in most cases, enabling us to attack beyond the borders of the state as determined by the U.N. and occasionally even outside the borders of Palestine, but in addition our forces have grown from day to day. Again, I cannot give you more details on this point.

During this period the Jewish Air Force was created, as was the skeleton of a Jewish Navy, and we have grown stronger. I do not wish to give you the impression that the war is nearing its end. We are only at the beginning of the road. The greatest and gravest tests lie ahead. We must not underestimate the power of the enemy...who has not yet thrown all his resources into the struggle and whose courage should not be underrated....We are facing a very trying test....We have not yet mobilized all our resources (this applies to the Yishuv as well as...to the Jewish people as a whole). With this we will endure to the end, and the end must be complete victory.

In the political sphere there is less news. Both the Powers have recognized the State of Israel. This is extremely important, because they rarely have anything in common....In the U.N. resolution of November 29 it was to our advantage that on the question of the Jewish people and Palestine those two governments saw eye to eye.

We cannot boast that we have reached a safe haven. Our enemies neither slumber nor sleep, and overt and covert attempts are being made in the capitals of the world to prevent the recognition of the State of Israel. The political and military obstacles that confront us have positive as well as negative implications. They make us realize that we are not regaining our independence as a result of international charity, that our existence is not dependent on the good will of others. We built the

Yishuv with our sweat and blood, we established the state through our own efforts, and we must maintain it with our own strength. Although we have never lost faith in the conscience of mankind, and we have not and will not cease to demand our just rights from the community of nations, we should constantly remind ourselves that our existence, freedom and future depend primarily on our own efforts, abilities and resolve.

...During the Mandatory rule we were offered a ceasefire by the U.N. Committee and the High Commissioner. We did not hesitate to accept it, provided it was upheld by the other side and we were assured freedom of movement within the country. The other side did not accept the proposal. Not long ago we received a similar request from the Security Council, as a disinterested party....We accepted that request, but the other side refused, either of its own accord or because of incitement by others....Meanwhile, during the session of the U.N. General Assembly summoned especially to discuss the Palestine problem, the Jewish people proclaimed the existence of the State of Israel, which was recognized immediately by the U.S.A. and the U.S.S.R., leaving the Assembly with almost nothing to discuss. It rose and decided to appoint a Mediator to try and find a peaceful solution between the two opposing parties, the Jews and the Arabs, and Count Bernadotte was given that task.

When the Security Council later decided to demand a four-week truce, the subject was assigned to the General Assembly's Mediator, although he was not necessarily bound to maintain the truce. At our meeting with him, he stated clearly that even if there were no truce, he would try to find points on which the Jews and the Arabs could agree, and would look for acceptable remedies to the problem. It is obvious, however, that a truce or armistice would aid him greatly in his peace mission.

The Government discussed the Security Council proposal and decided to accept it. A message to this effect has been sent to the Security Council, stating that the Government assumes that the decision refers to five topics which are vital to us: A) During the cessation of hostilities the naval blockade imposed on Israel by the Egyptian government will be annulled. B) The ban on the entrance of military forces under no circumstances implies a ban on Jewish immigration of any age; we agree that if immigrants of military age arrive during those four weeks they will not receive military training or be drafted during that period. C) The cessation of hostilities includes the absence of restrictions on bringing supplies to Jerusalem and guarantees freedom of movement on the roads. D) The truce involves maintenance of the military status quo in all captured territory. For instance, if the Arab Legion occupies the road between Ramallah and Sheikh Jarrah it has no right to advance any further and we have no right to drive it from its position. Similarly, our forces in Western Galilee retain control of the area they

hold, but may not continue to the north. E) The prohibition during the four weeks on the shipment of arms into Israel, Transjordan, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Yemen also implies that weapons inside these countries belonging to a foreign power cannot be turned over to the local authorities.

The right to determine the terms of the truce and when it has been violated has been given to the U.N. Mediator, Count Bernadotte. If the truce is imposed, and this will not necessarily be soon, I can assure you that our army is prepared for battle, and that no attack has been or will be cancelled in expectation of the truce....We have heard that the Arab countries have attached two conditions to their acceptance of Bernadotte's mission: a ban on Jewish immigration and the abolition of the Jewish state. I assume that the Mediator has enough common sense not to take it upon himself (if the rumors are correct) to present us with the Arab leaders' foolish proposal. We have always sought peace, and we have no conflict with the Arab peoples. But if peace is achieved, this will be only by the efforts of the State of Israel while safeguarding its sovereignty. Whoever desires otherwise will find himself confronting the might of this young nation, which will not rest until it has emerged victorious.

As for the domestic front—the State of Israel was not established to serve a military purpose. It is the realization of the Jewish people's Zionist aspiration and vision, and its principal mission is to gather in the exiled Jewish people and rebuild this desolate country. Foreign forces over which we had no control brought about a situation in which the State of Israel arose by war, and its major efforts are concentrated on the military front. It is impossible to know how much longer this young state will have to devote the best part of its efforts, strength, constructive energies and blood to this war. We have been obliged to undertake a huge constructive operation. The Mandatory Government left us a legacy of chaos in every sphere of administration. In the midst of the fighting we have had to reestablish public services and set up communications between this country and the rest of the world, because that was the first thing the Mandatory Government tried to destroy, informing the Postal Association that after May 15 Palestine would no longer exist. We cannot boast that the few services we have established are functioning on a proper level, owing to our lack of resources and the state of emergency. Nonetheless, Bevin's malicious plan has not succeeded. Since the departure of the Mandatory Government we have had more order and better services than before. There is still a great deal to be done, however, and the conditions are not favorable, with air raids and constant fighting almost everywhere....Yet the state is being built. Not only have we set up regular public services, we have also devoted ourselves to the two central tasks which represent our right to existence in this country—immigration and settlement. Again, for security reasons

I cannot give you precise numbers. I will only say that in this span of time more immigrants have entered the country than in any equivalent period in the previous generation. We believe that these numbers will increase and, whether there is a truce or not, many new settlements will arise throughout the country.

In closing, I would like to inform the Council of State that the two dissident military organizations have agreed to disband and that their members will be drafted into the Israel Defense Forces, like everyone else. I can only hope that their promises will be kept this time.

B. Repetur (Mapam): At its last sitting, the Council of State delegated its powers to the Government so that the latter would do its utmost to put the entire Yishuv on its feet in this war. Yet, in order to strengthen the Government and its influence in the Yishuv...the Council of State should participate in decisions on basic settlement and political issues. The Government made a grave mistake by not summoning the Council of State this week. The Security Council's proposal on the truce should have been brought before the Council, which would undoubtedly have confirmed the Government's actions, thereby...according legitimacy to the state's demands and positions.

Another important facet of our life in the Yishuv and our transition to an independent state has lately reached a new level of maturity, with the announcement by the Provisional Government that the Haganah, which has defended our achievements for several decades, courageously ensuring the security of our farms and property, and which defends us heroically on all fronts today, has become the Israel Defense Forces. The Council of State will doubtless support me in noting this important step in the defense of the state, providing added weight for the Government and the Council of State as well as encouragement for all those currently at the front. I hope that as part of its future activities, while in no way detracting from its powers or importance, the Provisional Government will ensure that these vital questions are brought before the Council of State for clarification and decision.

I should also point out that the basic constitution of the Council of State notes that basic policy will be decided by it....The war requires the participation of the Council of State in determining our fundamental policy. We cannot discuss all the vital questions concerning the military situation on all the fronts. Now that the enemy is at our gates and we are under siege, each Council Member must consider the proposals brought before us, but our primary task is to mobilize all our forces for the war. Nevertheless, I would like to make a few remarks about the Prime Minister's report. We must ensure that the demands and explanations sent to the Security Council by the Provisional Government regarding our rights to sovereignty and independence, as well as the continuation of free immigration and the building up of our forces, will be upheld in the future if ceasefire negotiations are renewed with the Secu-

...rity Council or its Mediator. We must be aware of the fact that the British Government has an open alliance with the invading Arab forces, and that there is an Anglo-American conspiracy against us. Even after the U.S. Government's formal recognition of the State of Israel we received no real help from it. On the contrary, there are signs that an attempt will be made to reduce the area of our state and limit our independence. Once again we have to contend with the prohibition of departures from Cyprus, even though tens of thousands of refugees have been there for months. This was done openly and evoked no reaction from the Security Council....Who knows if, in the last few weeks before the departure of the British, there will not be other acts tantamount to a declaration of war on the State of Israel and the Jewish people? These British activities are supported by the U.S. in various ways. We know that although the U.S. voted with the U.S.S.R. and its allies in the Security Council, it makes decisions and adopts positions which weaken the State of Israel while strengthening our assailants....

There is a danger that if a truce is decided upon and political talks are held we will be asked to withdraw to the borders of the November 29 resolution. We have not yet come to terms with the partition of the Land of Israel, and surely any additional reductions are both inconceivable and contrary to that resolution. The Government must reject any proposal which is contrary to the resolution or which limits our territory or encroaches upon our sovereignty. We must not forget that King Abdullah, who intended to destroy the State of Israel and proclaim himself king over Palestine from Jerusalem, is an ally of Great Britain....

The total mobilization of all the resources of the Yishuv must be our primary task at this hour....Within the next few weeks we will be faced with the immense task of absorbing tens of thousands of Jews from the camps of Cyprus and Europe, and they will join us in fighting the war. The first task of the Government, its Ministries and the general population must be focused on war efforts associated with the continued immigration of tens of thousands of Jews, their absorption in dozens of new settlements and their taking root in the land while building the state. We must correct all those flaws which were part of the mobilization of our human resources and the division of labor between the various sectors until now. We have drafted tens of thousands into the army and military industrial production. We need additional manpower and a healthy division of resources in order to supply our needs on the battlefields. In wartime we must organize our life differently than in the past...increasing responsibility and cooperation in the urban and rural sectors of the Yishuv.

We have declared a national war loan, and hope that the entire amount will be raised, although the sum required for the war, immigration, settlement and economic functioning is much more than the five million pounds which will be given by the people of Israel during the

emergency...There is no doubt that world Jewry will help, as is our right and obligation to demand, but the Yishuv must make additional efforts to mobilize funds. The Government must proceed quickly with making decisions, preparing a new taxation method and ensuring the equitable division of the burdens of war at both the front and the rear. Tens of thousands of people have already been drafted, two-thirds of them heads of families who are entitled to demand a basic wage from the state. Soldiers have been killed or wounded, and the state must do everything it can to ensure that their families are cared for....The Government must take immediate steps to introduce a new tax system, issue laws and establish institutions to correct injustices and protect the rights of the families of soldiers who have been wounded or killed....

It is our own strength which will determine our victory, but in the current political reality, international conflict and the general situation in the Security Council we have not done everything possible to mobilize those of our friends who have been fighting for us at Lake Success since November 29. We want to hear what steps will be taken to request more help from our loyal allies. The aid we demand is probably dependent on ties with the Soviets and the People's Republics and the appointment of delegates to those countries, subsequent to their recognition of the State of Israel. Following the Soviet decision to appoint an ambassador to Israel, have we followed suit by appointing an ambassador to Russia and the other countries which have recognized us? If not, why not? The Government must act quickly and appoint representatives in order to strengthen our friendship and enable us to request help in our military and political struggles.

M. Wilner (Maki): Distinguished Council...the discussions of this institution must cover fundamental issues, in order to provide guidance for the policies of the Provisional Government of the State of Israel.

We are in the midst of a bloody war...our situation is difficult—although it is better than both our friends and our enemies imagined it would be—not so much because the Supreme Arab Council in Palestine is fighting us, and not because King Abdullah and King Farouk are fighting us, but because Great Britain is fighting us overtly, and America is fighting us covertly....

The State of Israel was proclaimed and came into being after Truman's America had made every effort to thwart this, advocating an abortive trusteeship scheme. Our military position and the political support of the U.S.S.R. and other members of the U.N. are determining factors in our statehood. It is this cooperation which has established the Jewish state, contrary to the wishes of both America and our enemies.

At this stage it is impossible to say that both the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. have recognized us...U.S. recognition is only *de facto*, meaning—if you have succeeded in establishing a state anyway, despite my wishes, I have no alternative but to acknowledge the existing