

Prime Minister's Report on Renewed Fighting in the Negev; State Emblem and Flag

Introduction

Count Bernadotte's recommendation on the exclusion of the Negev from the Jewish state was based largely on his assessment of the situation on the ground and the precarious physical presence of Jews in that part of Palestine, although British insistence on territorial continuity between Egypt and Transjordan was doubtless one of the factors he had taken into consideration. His recommendation provided the incentive for the Israel Government to try and change the situation. Egypt's refusal to permit regular convoys to Jewish settlements in the Negev, contrary to the provisions of the truce, provided a pretext for the initiation of operation "Ten Plagues" on 15 October 1948. Some days after its termination Ben-Gurion reported to the Provisional Council of State on the operation. As was customary in 1948, no debate followed a report on the military situation.

Sitting 24 of the Provisional Council of State

28 October 48 (25 Tishrei 5709)

The Prime Minister, D. Ben-Gurion: Members of the Provisional Council of State, I have to report to you on the campaign in the south, which lasted almost exactly one week, from 12 Tishrei (October 15) to 18 Tishrei (October 22).

This campaign is important for a variety of reasons: the authority of the U.N., the balance of power in the Middle East, and the future of Israel. This campaign put the viability of the truce, the effectiveness of U.N. supervision, the unity and efficiency of the Arab League, the reality of the Gaza government, the ability of the Egyptian army and the power of the Jewish army to the test. Apart from the last-named, the Jewish army, they all failed.

The truce: we opposed and oppose the truce, but we accepted it because we were told to do so by the U.N. We opposed and oppose the truce because to some extent it legalizes the invasion...granting the invading armies a certain international status and putting the invaders and the invaded on an equal footing. In our view the truce prolongs the war unnecessarily, harms both Jews and Arabs, and does not further peace, as we have seen during three truces. But we accepted the truce because our policy is

based on the U.N. We are not unaware of the U.N.'s weakness, but we regard attempts to utilize that weakness as being shortsighted. We believe that it is in our interests, as Jews and human beings, to enhance the U.N.'s authority and ability. The day the U.N. collapses will be the blackest day in the history of mankind, and perhaps one of the most tragic days in the history of our people. We are interested in world peace at least as much as any other nation. We are interested in cooperation between nations, in the rule of law in the world, in the peaceful settlement of international disputes and in cooperation between East and West.

By now there is no one left in the world who claims that we agreed to the truce out of weakness. We accepted the truce because of our loyalty to the U.N., despite its weakness, but we did not, nor will we, accept a one-sided truce. It was obvious to us from the outset that the truce we and the Arabs were ordered to keep was one-sided—always and on all fronts. Hardly a day passed without the truce being broken by the enemy forces: in the south, in the center, in the north and in Jerusalem. One only has to spend one night in Jerusalem to hear, see and feel that the truce is not kept. The enemy's attacks, snipings and bombardments are almost incessant. The truce is broken not only by the failure to cease fire. The main idea of the truce is that neither side should suffer...or benefit while it is in force. Neither side should increase its military strength or gain in any way. But during the truce the Egyptians...constantly brought in reinforcements from Egypt, Sudan and other countries in Africa. They brought in weapons continuously. They forced the local inhabitants to join the army and dig trenches. They also openly and constantly infringed one of the basic decisions of the U.N. supervisors, without which the truce could not hold.

When the second truce began, on July 18, I believe, the situation in the south was rather strange. The Egyptians had conquered the line from west to east, from Majdal to Beit Guvrin. Our army had conquered the line from north to south, and both lines crossed near a point called Kartiya. Each force could cut the other one's line, and the U.N. supervisors decided that both had the right to bring convoys through: the Egyptians, from west to east, on the line that crossed our line, in the afternoon; and our army, from north to south, on the line crossing the Egyptians' line, in the morning.

The Egyptians did not keep to that decision and did not let our convoys pass freely. Their refusal to keep to the decision was based on two assumptions:

A. They thought that the U.N. supervisors neither wanted nor were able to implement their decision. They had good reason to think this after what happened at Latrun when, contravening the explicit decision and the idea of the truce, the Arabs refused to pump water to Jerusalem, even blowing up the pumping station at Latrun, and the U.N. neither

wanted to nor was able to do anything. All our demands that water be pumped to Jerusalem the new way went unanswered. The Egyptians thought that even if they opposed the U.N. and prevented the convoy from leaving, nothing would happen to them for the simple reason that the U.N. can make decisions but cannot implement them.

B. The Egyptians thought that Israel and its army neither wanted nor was able to implement the decision on its own. They may have had a reason to assume this, because of all the Arab armies which fought us after May 15, the Egyptian army was the only one which could boast—albeit not quite justifiedly—that it had not been defeated by the IDF. All our conquests and victories before the first truce, and especially before the second one, in those ten historic days, occurred primarily on the fronts with the Legion, the Iraqis, the Syrians and the Lebanese. The Egyptians were not hurt after May 15, even though they hardly managed to conquer anything from us apart from two points, and their so-called conquests in Ashdod, Beersheba and Gaza involved conquering the Arab areas. At any rate, they thought that what had happened to the other Arab armies had not happened to them, and that Israel's army would not venture to stand up to them. On the basis of these two assumptions the Egyptians refused for three months to adhere to the decision to give passage to our convoys to the settlements and our forces in the south and in the Negev.

Their first assumption about the U.N. was verified. The U.N. neither wanted nor was able to—whether from weakness or from lack of will—to maintain its own resolutions and enforce the truce....The Egyptians had not demanded the truce, the U.N. had decided on it, and it has no validity if it does not enable us to maintain contact freely with our settlements and forces in the south. The U.N. supervisors did not fulfill their duty.

Every week we asked the U.N. observers to enable us to send convoys to the Negev and each time we received the reply: "You are in the right, but the Arabs refuse. We'll try."

We waited for weeks, we waited for months, not in complete idleness, because we found a different way of bringing supplies to our settlements in the Negev. But we had the right to arrange our supply lines not in the way we found but simply, by convoys. Until our patience gave out.

On Friday, 12 Tishrei, a convoy set out for the Negev, although the U.N. had not yet obtained the Egyptians' consent. But three months had passed since the decision about the convoys had been made, and more than three months since the second truce had begun. The Egyptians attacked the convoy and our people had to retreat. Some of our vehicles were burned by the Egyptians. Then our army was given the order to open the way itself, and it obeyed that order.

The campaign of that week...is already history and there is no need to describe it in detail here. I will note only the main points. In that campaign a small part of our forces faced the army of the largest Arab army in our country. Let it suffice if I point out that the ratio of Jews in Palestine to Egyptians in Egypt is one to twenty-four. Although that was not quite the ratio between the armies—for obvious reasons I cannot cite precise numbers or even proportions—only a small part of our army participated in that campaign. Most of it is still on other fronts, where we have no security either, nor do we have any guarantee that there will not be a surprise attack, in contradiction to the U.N. decision, because there are constant infringements of the truce by the enemy forces on the other fronts too. On the other hand, in this campaign the Egyptians deployed all their forces here in the country, which constitute most of the entire Egyptian army.

Since the truce of July 18, Egypt's forces had increased in men and equipment. Despite the so-called supervision of the U.N., the flow of equipment, particularly heavy equipment, had not stopped. There had been continuous work of entrenchment, not only by the Egyptians but also by the masses of Arabs who were forced to join the army. There had also been a nonstop flow of reinforcements from Egypt, and the Egyptian army had been supplemented by troops from Sudan and Saudi Arabia, apart from irregular forces which the Mufti tried to organize.

During this period the Egyptians attempted to establish a so-called All-Palestinian government within the area under their control. Not long before the campaign began, a founding assembly, as it were, of Palestinian Arabs met in Gaza, in one of the centers of the Egyptian army, and a government was set up not only for the Egyptian area and not only for the Arab area but for all Palestine. The Egyptians were sure that by this they were increasing their power within the Arab population, which would support the Egyptian army should fighting break out between it and the Jews once again.

Despite these basic facts, our army succeeded in thrashing the Egyptian army on the first day. The airforce struck first, and in one attack on the first evening virtually destroyed the Egyptian airforce in the country, wiping out their air base at El-Arish and damaging most of the fighter planes and bombers there. From then on our airforce controlled the skies in the south and continued to batter all the enemy centers by night and by day: in Beersheba, Gaza, Majdal, Faluja, Beit Guvrin, Iraq-Suedan, Iraq-Manshiye and elsewhere....Our airforce, which did not exist a year ago and on May 15, when the Arab countries invaded the country, was virtually powerless, did wonders. Egypt's airpower was destroyed, all its armies were thrashed mercilessly...wherever they were the heavy hand of the young Israeli airforce found them.

Together with the airforce and in its wake went the infantry and the artillery, and in the first battles all the Egyptian supply and communi-

cations lines were cut. That is one of the secrets, perhaps the main secret, of this victory, which astounded the whole world.

In this campaign all three arms of our forces worked in concert: the army, the navy and the airforce. And if the airforce began the action, the navy concluded it. Only two days ago the Egyptians revealed the secret that on Friday, 19 Tishrei, after the truce and after their ships had fired at Israeli ships patrolling near Gaza, the Egyptian flagship King Farouk was sunk, and, according to information from America, another Egyptian ship, a minesweeper, was sunk at the same time.

The army completely fulfilled its mission of liberating the way to the Negev and assuring freedom of movement for our army and our settlements in the south and the Negev. Almost all the crossroads in the south and the Negev are in our hands. This does not mean that the Egyptian army has been completely crushed, it still constitutes a considerable force, but it is paralyzed and at any rate cannot do anything in its present state. Much of it is enclosed in small islands surrounded by Israeli forces, as in Faluja, Iraq-Suedan and Iraq-Manshiye. The army at Majdal is also cut off from the base in Gaza, which has become the main base. Our army has conquered Beth Hanoun, which controls both sides of the road from Majdal to Gaza; before the truce we conquered Beersheba which, apart from its importance as the place where Jewish history began, and in a way which is very relevant for today—the Hebrews' constructive efforts to dig wells and make the desert blossom, and the efforts of the Philistines to block up the wells and keep the desert desolate—dominates one of the principal routes between the entire south and Egypt. Our army is also at Beit Guvrin, the site of biblical Mareshah. If nothing unforeseen happens, if other armies do not come to help or unknown sources are not developed in Egypt, changing the situation in the south, all the Negev is in the hands of our army, and there is nothing to stop us reaching every corner of it, whether for military or for settlement purposes.

To our great regret, this cannot be regarded as a campaign which is ended. No peace treaty has been signed, only a truce has been declared, and it is as unsteady and unstable as the previous ones.

Together with the demand for a ceasefire, which we accepted after our army had accomplished its mission, proposals were made by the Security Council that the armies should return to their positions of 12 Tishrei, and that there should be proper supervision as well as negotiations with Egypt, whether directly or through an intermediary, about removing all the obstacles between us. Our representative at the U.N. informed the Security Council that we would not entertain the idea of withdrawing our forces. That announcement was both official and necessary. The present state of affairs does not allow us to return to the previous situation: in order to do that the Egyptians would have to bring in fresh forces and we would have to bring the dead back to life. What hap-

pened on 12 Tishrei is history, and the wheel cannot be turned back. The U.N., which should have guaranteed us free passage, could not or did not want to do so. Our army forced a way through and, as far as this is within our power, this way will remain open, not only for our army and the current settlers but also for the hundreds of thousands of settlers who will make the many deserts in this part of the country blossom.

That campaign between the Israeli and Egyptian armies is historically unique. Our contact with Egypt preceded our contact with any other nation, and Jewish history in fact began in Egypt with an event of which we need not be ashamed—the first Jew taken to Egypt saved that country from famine. Of all the ancient nations in the region which scorned us and fought us—the Amalekites, the Amorites, the Philistines, the Moabites, the Ammonites, the Syrians, the Assyrians, the Babylonians—the Egyptians were the least aggressive, and there were virtually no wars between us and our great neighbor to the south.

Only after the House of David split, in the time of Rehoboam, did it happen that Shishak the King of Egypt pillaged the Temple and King Rehoboam's palace in Jerusalem.

We clashed at the time of King Asa, the fifth generation of David's house, with the Sudanese, known as the Cushites in the Bible, who reached Mareshah, near Beit Guvrin, to fight Judah, and were defeated: "And Asa and the people that were with him pursued them unto Gerar...and they carried away much spoil. And they smote the cities round about Gerar...and returned to Jerusalem." The only military clash with Egypt was at the time of one of the last kings of David's dynasty, at the time of Pharaoh-Necho and Josiah. Truth to tell, this time the king of Judah was the aggressor, because Pharaoh-Necho informed Josiah that he had no quarrel with Judah and was going out to fight the Assyrians at Carchemish by Euphrates. But Josiah, remaining loyal to the treaty he had made with Assyria, fought Pharaoh-Necho at Megiddo and was killed in that war.

Apart from those isolated incidents in our long history of more than three thousand years, this campaign in the south in the last week of Tishrei this year was the first clash between the armies of Israel and Egypt, and we hope also the last. We have no dispute with the Egyptian people nor do we desire its possessions, and if the Egyptians were once ungrateful for the fact that Joseph saved them, and made our forefathers labor for four hundred years, we have long since forgiven them, and our ancestors even settled that score when they made use of the Egyptians when they left Goshen and in what happened to the Egyptian chariots in the Red Sea. We see no cause for any rift between us and our neighbors to the south. Those who incited Egypt to fight us sought not the benefit of the Egyptians or the Arabs but to weaken Egypt and involve it in a dispute which did not concern it, in order to divert attention from its vital interests elsewhere. It is no coincidence that this is the first time in the

history of the war waged by the Arab countries on Israel that the British press was full of praise for Israel's army and condemnation for Egypt. It is doubtful whether the important Pasha who heads Egypt's government served his country's vital interests...when he involved its army in this unfortunate adventure in the Negev, instead of focusing on his country's independence and liberating it from the foreign yoke on its borders and at the sources of the Nile.

We want good neighborly relations with Egypt, not only because of the memories of the past but because of the needs of the future. We believe that Egypt is also interested in peace and mutual aid. Egypt still needs to make huge economic, cultural, social and political efforts to fulfill the formal independence it has recently achieved, and so that its great nation, the largest in the Middle East, numbering almost 18 million, will be healthy, free, advanced and truly independent, and so that Egypt may settle its relations with its neighbors, Libya and Sudan, without external pressure or interference.

Peaceful and friendly relations between Israel and Egypt will benefit both countries and both nations. We hope that after the unsuccessful attempts at warfare engineered by the enemies of both Egypt and Israel, the rulers of Egypt will open their eyes and realize that that is not the way to glory, and will accept the hand which Israel extends in peace and neighborly relations. That, at least, is what the nation and government of Israel sincerely wants.

Naturally, we cannot close our eyes to what is happening on other fronts, and what may be going on in various offices, not only in Cairo, but also in Amman, Baghdad and elsewhere. We hear the thunder of cannon near Petah Tikva and in the Jezreel Valley. Jerusalem has hardly had a single quiet night. And with all our fierce desire for peace, we must be ready for any attack.

A few weeks ago, when we discussed our attitude to the U.N. General Assembly, which is currently meeting in Paris, I stated that our campaign combines military and political aspects, since neither one on its own can force a decision. Therefore, with all our military victories in the south and our readiness on other fronts, we must remember that we must also fight a political campaign, because not only local forces but also those at a distance will be decisive. The chances and difficulties confronting us on the political front require a special debate. Today I have merely tried to sum up the military campaign, as Minister of Defense: we have opened the routes to virtually the entire Negev, assuring freedom of passage for our settlements and our forces, we have control of the sky, we have conquered Beersheba, Beit Guvrin and a series of points which are important in both strategic and settlement terms, we have put the "Gaza government" to flight, we have cut off the enemy's communications and supply lines, we have defeated the Egyptian navy, we have surrounded a large part of the invading army and we have

brought about a fundamental change in the balance of power between us and the Arabs.

The campaign is not over and the danger has not passed. Foreign armies are still on our soil and we have not yet attained security, but we hope that our victories in the south have prepared the ground for a juster and more realistic discussion of the fate of the Negev as well as bringing the possibility of peace between us and our neighbors nearer. And until we have peace, our armies must be ready for anything, and I hope they will not let us down in the future, as they have not let us down till now.