



Preemptive Justice: Abba Eban's Defense of Israel at the UN

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Sunday, Aug. 22 at 11:00 AM EDT

Course Description:

On June 5, 1967, after three weeks of provocations by a coalition of Arab countries, Israel struck a stunning preemptive blow against the Egyptian air force, paving the way for a victory that included the capture of Sinai and the Gaza Strip from Egypt, the Golan Heights from Syria, and the West Bank and eastern Jerusalem from Jordan. From early in the war, Israel's leaders feared a repeat of the 1956 Sinai campaign, in which it won a lightning-fast victory, but was blamed internationally for initiating the conflict and was forced to withdraw from all the captured territory without receiving any significant concessions. Israel's government therefore sent Foreign Minister Abba Eban, Israel's most able spokesman in English, to address the UN Security Council on the second day of the war. Combining overwhelming evidence with deftly-turned phrases and supreme confidence in the justness of Israel's cause, Eban made the case that Israel, in striking preemptively, had been acting entirely in self-defense, and argued that the country should not be pushed to make territorial concessions unless its neighbors were willing to make peace. This seminar will carefully examine Eban's rhetorical and intellectual tour de force, arguing for its continued relevance to the geopolitical realities that remain a half-century after its dramatic delivery.

Guiding Questions:

1. What were the main challenges Eban sought to address in his speech and what were the main points of which he sought to convince his audience?
2. What were the main arguments Eban made in his speech?
3. Do you think that Eban's rhetoric was effective for persuading the general audience? For persuading political and opinion leaders?
4. Do you consider this a great speech? Why or why not?

**Excerpts from Chapter 12, "Six Days of War Change a Country Forever," from
Daniel Gordis, *Israel: A Concise History of a Nation Reborn***

FOR SOME TIME, the region had been growing increasingly tense. Syria had declared its intention to divert water away from Israel's National Water Carrier, by up to 35 percent. Israel had responded that it would consider such a diversion an act of war, but the Syrians continued. Border clashes ensued, with Syria firing on Israeli villages while Israel attacked heavy earth-moving equipment the Syrians were using for the project.

In the spring of 1967, outside parties consciously added fuel to the fire. The Soviets informed Egyptian and Syrian representatives that Israel had brought twelve brigades to the north in preparation for attack. Prime Minister Eshkol denied the claims, and on April 26, he even invited the Soviet ambassador, Dmitri Chucakhin, to go to the north with him and to see for himself. (Chucakhin declined.) Though the United States also insisted that the Soviet reports were utterly false, the Syrians chose to believe the Soviets. By informing Syria and Egypt that Israel was planning a war, the Soviets were, in essence, sparking one.

A few weeks later, on May 15, Israel staged its annual Independence Day Parade. Typically held in a different location each year, in 1967 the parade was scheduled to take place in Jerusalem. As always, the parade was largely military in nature, designed to highlight the army's strength....

As the parade proceeded, an Israeli official passed a note from IDF intelligence to Yitzhak Rabin—now the IDF's chief of staff—who in turn passed it on to Prime Minister Eshkol. Egyptian armored vehicles, it said, had entered the Sinai Peninsula. Eshkol and Rabin chose to act with restraint, but as the day went on, the notes became more frequent and urgent....

The Israeli leadership was not certain how to respond. On the one hand, they knew that Nasser was an aficionado of such military displays and still hoped that he was not intent on war; on the other, they knew that Egypt and Syria had signed a mutual defense treaty several months earlier. But Israel's hope that the crisis might be resolved diplomatically or with a minor military action eroded when Cairo Radio announced, "Our forces are in a complete state of readiness for war." On May 15, a day that Arab nations marked with mourning for their defeat in the 1948 war (and the day of the parade), Nasser declared, "Brothers, it is our duty to prepare for the final battle in Palestine." The long-anticipated "next round" in the Arab campaign to destroy Israel seemed increasingly likely.

THE NEXT THREE WEEKS—known in Israel as the *hamtanah* (“the waiting period”)—were one of the most stressful periods in Israel’s history. The Egyptians poured five divisions of troops and equipment into the Sinai, each one composed of 15,000 men, 100 tanks, 150 armored personnel carriers, and a supply of Soviet artillery.

Did Nasser truly intend to go to war, or was this all a matter of posturing, of restoring Arab pride, that ultimately got out of hand? Scholars remain divided on that subject. Whatever his true intentions, Nasser’s actions created the sense among Israelis that his goal was war. On May 16, he raised the stakes by taking the impending conflict into the international arena. Since 1957 (after the 1956 Sinai Campaign), the UN Emergency Force had stationed several thousand troops in dozens of observation posts along the international border of Gaza and Sharm al-Sheikh (the name of the area at the very southern tip of the Sinai Peninsula). The troops were to stop infiltrations into Israel and to make sure that Egypt did not close the Straits of Tiran. Now, though, Egyptian troops were streaming into the Sinai.

In what was a clear act of belligerency, Nasser instructed U Thant to remove the UN troops from the region. Israel assumed that the secretary-general would put up at least some *pro forma* resistance. But U Thant complied immediately, without so much as informing the General Assembly. By May 19, there was no UN presence in the area. The United Nations, it was painfully clear, was not going to offer Israel protection against an onslaught.

The political and military brass agreed that Israel would consider Egyptian steps to close the Straits of Tiran (which connected the southern Israeli port of Eilat with the Red Sea and was Israel’s critical commercial link to the east) a *casus belli* (an act that justifies war). Two days later, Egypt did just that. In the space of eight days, Egypt had successfully erased every diplomatic gain Israel had made in the 1956 Sinai Campaign.

THE DIPLOMATIC FRONT NOW became the most critical. The man at the center of Israel’s international efforts was Abba Eban.... In 1966, he began what would be an eight-year stint as foreign minister. In Eban, Israel had a uniquely brilliant, articulate, and eminently qualified representative.... Eban rushed to France, which only eleven years earlier had been Israel’s chief ally in the Sinai Campaign and was still its main supplier of armaments. But Eban departed for France worried that those sands were shifting....

Eban’s meeting with French president Charles De Gaulle confirmed his fears. De Gaulle insisted that the situation had to be resolved by France, Britain, the United States, and the Soviet Union. But that was a patently cynical demand that no one could satisfy; the USSR was fanning the flames of the conflict and was not going to

facilitate a diplomatic solution. De Gaulle also warned that Israel must not be the one to “shoot first.” When Eban pointed out that the closing of the Straits of Tiran constituted a *casus belli*, De Gaulle rejected the notion out of hand. That Egypt was crippling Israel’s economy could not have mattered less to the French leader. When Eban pointed out to De Gaulle that in 1956 France had promised that it would recognize Israel’s right to fight if Egypt imposed a blockade, which is precisely what had happened, De Gaulle responded nonchalantly that 1967 was not 1956....

In return for Israel’s leaving the Sinai in 1957, the United States had promised to recognize Israel’s right to self-defense should Egypt ever close the Straits of Tiran again. But Eban’s meeting with President Lyndon Johnson, his next stop after London, was disappointing. Johnson agreed that Egypt’s closing the Straits was “illegal” and told Eban that the United States was formulating a “Red Sea Regatta” plan, to use an international convoy of ships from forty maritime powers, affirming free passage through the Straits of Tiran to guarantee international maritime rights.

Eban left the meeting uneasy. Israel was facing an existential threat, while Johnson—clearly preoccupied with the American war in Vietnam—was unlikely to be able to act on the Regatta plan. Like De Gaulle, Johnson also warned Israel not to be the first to attack. “Israel will not be alone unless it decides to go alone,” said the American president.

It was a far cry from the commitments the United States had made in 1957. The United States, like France, was reneging on its 1956 promise.

AS EBAN TRAVERSED THE world with only marginal success, matters in Israel became increasingly tense. The primary question facing the country’s leadership was whether to wait before shooting, as America had demanded, or to gain the upper hand by attacking first. Prime Minister Levi Eshkol insisted that Israel had to wait: “It is not politically, diplomatically and perhaps even morally logical to start a war,” he said. “Now we have to restrain ourselves and to maintain our forces for a week or two or even longer. . . . Maturity demands that we stand up to this test.” On May 27, the cabinet voted to wait before acting....

On May 29, Jordan’s King Hussein flew to Cairo to meet with Nasser. Nasser brought to the meeting the defense pact he had signed with Syria a year earlier, and Hussein said, “Give me another copy; let us replace the word Syria by the word Jordan and the matter will be arranged.”

Israel had invested a great deal in building a relationship with Jordan. In the War of Independence, the relationship had held fairly firm despite fighting in and around Jerusalem. Palestinian incursions notwithstanding, there had been relative peace on the Israel-Jordan border for nineteen years. But now, under unbearable pressure, the

king felt he had no choice but to go to war. The Jordanians also signed a mutual defense pact with Syria, and Israel was now facing the possibility of war on three different fronts: Syria, Jordan, and Egypt. A day later, Iraqi troops reached Egypt, just as they had in 1948, eager to join the fight.

In the meantime, the United States did little. There were no ships in the area that could support an effort to break the blockade, and Israel had no time to spare. American and British requests for other countries to join them went mostly ignored. Johnson announced that he could see no way out of the crisis, while the White House—focusing on its endless problems in Vietnam and wary of expending precious political capital on yet another military venture—simply ignored Israel's pleas for missiles, tanks, and jets....

The Arab world had also awakened. On May 26, Nasser announced, "Our basic objective will be to destroy Israel." Ahmed Shukeiri, who had been the Saudi ambassador to the United Nations from 1957 to 1962 and who would eventually become the Palestine Liberation Organization's chairman, declared, "In the event of a conflagration, no Jews whatsoever will survive." Protests were held in Cairo, Baghdad, and Damascus, and throngs of people gathered in the streets, chanting, "Death to the Jews!" and "Throw the Jews into the sea!"

BY JUNE 1, IT WAS clear that Johnson's Regatta plan—the international effort to open the waterways—had aroused no international interest and was not going to happen. Asked if the United States would seek to restrain Israel from firing first, U.S. secretary of state Dean Rusk replied, "I don't think it is our business to restrain anybody." Israel had the first indication that it might be allowed to attack.

Domestically, Eshkol understood the country's mood and decided that, more than anything, the government needed to make a show of unity. He established Israel's first "unity government," bringing leaders of the opposition into the cabinet. Among those opposition leaders was Menachem Begin, who under Ben-Gurion had been banished to the political desert....

In response to widespread demand, Moshe Dayan, who was a member of Ben-Gurion's Rafi Party and not Eshkol's Labor Party, was appointed defense minister. Israel's nervous public, which had never seen a unity government before, greeted Dayan's appointment with cheers....

At the unity government's first meeting on Thursday, June 1, 1967, the decision was made that the political echelon would meet with the general staff and defense committee the next morning, in the "Pit," an underground operations center at the IDF headquarters in Tel Aviv. At that meeting, on Friday, the government made the decision to go to war. On Saturday, June 3, the generals (Sharon, Rabin, Yeshayahu

Gavish, and others) presented their war plans, and Dayan said that the cabinet would meet the next day to authorize the army to act.

On Sunday, in a seven-hour meeting, Dayan presented his military proposal to the cabinet. The situation was dire: the Egyptians had at least 100,000 troops and 900 tanks in the Sinai. To the north, Syria had readied 75,000 men and 400 tanks, while the Jordanians had amassed 32,000 men and almost 300 tanks. In total, Israel faced a potential force of 207,000 soldiers and 1,600 tanks. With full mobilization, Israel could muster 264,000 soldiers but had only 800 tanks. When it came to planes, the situation was even worse. The Arabs had 700 combat aircraft, while Israel had only 300.

But Dayan insisted that Israel could win if its forces struck soon. He asked the cabinet to approve a first strike, with the further request that he and Rabin alone would determine the timing. The cabinet voted 12–5 to authorize a preemptive attack on Egypt. The timing of the attack was left to Dayan and Rabin.

ON THE MORNING OF June 5, the Fifty-Fifth Paratrooper Brigade was stationed at the Tel Nof air force base, not far from Rehovot, a small Israeli city along the Mediterranean Sea situated about twelve miles south of Tel Aviv. At 7:10 A.M., the Israeli soldiers were astonished to see dozens of planes taking off, flying extremely low and heading south....

By 7:30 A.M., two hundred Israeli jet-fighters were flying toward Egypt, ready to attack. Israel knew that at that hour Egypt's pilots would be eating breakfast, and that their planes would be entirely unattended. The attacking force represented a huge portion of Israel's air force; only twelve planes stayed behind to defend the entire country, a terribly risky move. The attacking planes flew dangerously low, often at an altitude of only fifteen meters, to evade Egypt's radar....

Jordanian radar detected the Israeli jets, but they were unable to warn the Egyptians, who had changed their frequency codes without informing the Jordanians. It was a costly mistake. In just three hours, in successive waves of attacks (Israeli aircraft returned to base, were refueled and rearmed, then set out for Egypt again), Israel destroyed hundreds of Egyptian aircraft. A third of Egypt's pilots were killed, thirteen bases were no longer functional, and twenty-three radar stations and antiaircraft sites were knocked out of service....

The Israelis lost seventeen planes and five pilots.... At 10:35 A.M., about three hours after the first Israeli planes had taken off, Yitzhak Rabin received a simple report: "The Egyptian air force has ceased to exist." Israel would suffer many losses in the days that would follow, but the IDF's leadership understood what had just happened — Israel had essentially won the war before it had even begun.

THE ISRAELIS APPROACHED JORDAN'S King Hussein, pleading with him not to enter the conflict. Though Jordan had begun firing on Israel, the Israelis said that if the Jordanians held their fire, Israel would continue to accept the terms of the armistice the two countries had signed in 1949. But King Hussein—who may well have believed Nasser's protestations that Egypt was faring well in the conflict and had to worry about fury among his own population if he did not join the battle—responded by instructing his troops to cross the armistice line and by putting his air force on alert to prepare for action.

At 11:50 A.M., Jordanian, Syrian, and Iraqi planes attacked Israel, but over the next two hours, the IAF shot down or repelled all the enemy aircraft and destroyed Jordanian and Syrian air force bases. On June 5 alone, Israel destroyed four hundred Arab planes. Its air dominance was now established.

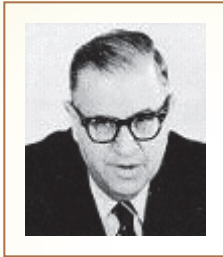
On the ground, Israeli troops cut off the Gaza Strip from the rest of Egypt. The next day, Israeli soldiers captured Sharm el-Sheikh without firing a single shot and reopened the Straits of Tiran.

Events Leading to the Six Day War (25-30 May, 1967)



This map is for illustrative purposes only and should not be considered authoritative

Abba Eban



Abba Eban was an Israeli orator, diplomat and politician who served in many capacities including Deputy Prime Minister and Israeli Ambassador to the United Nations.

Eban (born February 2, 1915; died November 17, 2002) was born in [Cape Town, South Africa](#), and moved to the [United Kingdom](#) at an early age. Heavily involved in Zionist activities, at the outbreak of [World War II](#) Eban went to work for [Chaim Weizmann](#) at the [World Zionist Organization](#) in [London](#). He also served in the British Army in [Egypt](#) and [Mandate Palestine](#), becoming an intelligence officer in [Jerusalem](#) where he coordinated and trained volunteers for resistance in the event of a German invasion.

In 1947, Eban was posted to work for the [Jewish Agency](#) in [New York](#) and was appointed as a liaison officer to the [United Nations Special Committee on Palestine \(UNSCOP\)](#), where he was successful in attaining approval for [Resolution 181](#), calling for the [partition of Palestine](#). For the next decade, Eban served as Israel's permanent representative at the [United Nations](#) and as Israel's [Ambassador to the United States](#).

In 1959, Eban returned to [Israel](#) and was elected to [Knesset](#) for the [Mapai political party](#), serving under [Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion](#) as Minister of Education and Culture from 1960 to 1963 and then as Deputy Prime Minister under [Levi Eshkol](#) from 1963 to 1966.

From 1966 to 1974, Eban served as Israel's Minister of Foreign Affairs, defending the country in the political arena following the [Six-Day War](#) and ensuring that world powers knew Israel had defended itself in the war and not acted aggressively. He was a famous supporter of land for peace exchanges with Egypt and the Palestinians and played a key role in shaping [UN Security Council Resolutions 242](#) and [338](#).

In 1988, after having served for three decades in the [Knesset](#), Eban was booted over internal splits within the [Labor Party](#) and he devoted the rest of his life to academia, writing and teaching about Israel. He served temporary posts as a visiting academic at Princeton, Columbia and George Washington universities.

Abba Eban was a member of the American Academy of Sciences. His books include *Heritage: Civilization and the Jews*, *Promised Land*, *My Country: The Story of Modern Israel*, *Abba Eban*, *Voice of Israel*, *The Tide of Nationalism*, *My People*, *the New Diplomacy*, *Maze of Justice*, *Personal Witness*, and, in 1998, *Diplomacy for the Next Century*. He was chief consultant and narrator of the nine-part television program *Heritage*, and editor-in-chief and narrator of the five-part television series *Personal Witness: A Nation is Born*. He completed *The Brink of Peace*, a film on the Middle East peace process for the PBS television network in the U.S. He received the Israel Prize in 2001.

He died in Israel on November 17, 2002.

**Background to Abba Eban's Speech of June 6, 1967 to the Security Council,
Excerpts Taken from Asaf Siniver, *Abba Eban: A Biography*,
Chapter 13, "A Very Foreign Foreign Minister"**

On the first day of the war Eban made his way from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, where the cabinet met in an air-raid shelter in the Knesset building, with the unsettling noise of Jordanian artillery shells landing a few hundred yards away. It was clear that Eban's key task in the next few days would be to ensure that the military achievements would not be squandered under international pressure for a quick Israeli withdrawal, as had been the case a decade earlier.

Eban took some comfort in the fact that Israel's bargaining position was much better than it had been in the aftermath of the Suez Crisis: Gamal Abdel Nasser's closure of the Straits of Tiran, his dismissal of the United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF) from the Sinai Peninsula, and the mobilization of 100,000 Egyptian troops toward the Israeli border were viewed by most foreign governments as the triggers of the crisis; Eban's mission to Paris, London, and Washington, DC, had also demonstrated Israel's determination to exhaust all diplomatic avenues to prevent war; and finally, U.S. president Lyndon Johnson was far more sympathetic to Israel's security needs than had been President Dwight D. Eisenhower during the Suez Crisis. This time Israel was not isolated and did not risk a unanimous condemnation at the United Nations.

But Eban still had to convince the international community not to force Israel to return to the June 4, or pre-war lines (the 1949 Green Line) without the conclusion of Arab-Israeli peace. As he heard the news from New York that France and India were already drafting up resolutions calling for an immediate cease-fire and an Israeli withdrawal to the June 4 lines, he felt a sense of a deterministic, historical repetition. Yet again he had to advocate Israel's righteousness before the UN Security Council and the world media.

At 8:00 p.m. he went home to pack his suitcase and say goodbye to Suzy and his children Eli and Gila, who were huddled in the air-raid shelter attached to the Foreign Ministry residence. After the surreal experience of attending a government meeting under the target of enemy guns, Eban came even closer to bearing the scars of war as he bid his family farewell. As Abba and Suzy separated from their embrace, a swift gush of wind crossed the gap between them. A policeman standing nearby pointed out to Suzy a piece of shrapnel that had flown between her and her husband's heads.

After a precarious three-hour drive to Tel Aviv via side roads, at 3:00 am on Tuesday, June 6, Eban embarked on a particularly tortuous journey to New York,

accompanied by his political secretary, Moshe Raviv. As Lod Airport was closed to international flights, they had to charter a twin-engine plane to Athens from Tel Aviv's domestic airport. Flying at low altitude to avoid detection by enemy radar, they landed in Athens and from there continued on a KLM flight to Amsterdam, and then on to a transatlantic flight to New York. Three hours before landing at Kennedy Airport, the pilot delivered to Eban a radio message from Gideon Rafael, the ambassador at the UN: the discussion at the Security Council was moving swiftly, and Eban was expected to address the council as soon as he landed. Sleep-deprived for thirty-six hours, Eban asked the air crew for pen and paper and retired to their curtained cubicle to write the most important speech of his life.

The three national television networks canceled their normal programming to broadcast the momentous debate at the UN Security Council. The tension in the gallery was almost tangible following heated exchanges among the Soviet, Iraqi, Syrian, and American representatives. As the New York Times reported the following day, fifty million viewers were glued to their television screens, engrossed in the "nuances of debate and oratory, an insight into the shifting tides of political alliances and the numbing spectacle of mankind torn apart."

It was nearly midnight by the time Eban addressed the Security Council, carrying with him nothing but his hastily prepared notes and the heavy burden of defending Israel's cause. His dramatic opening sentence set the stage to one of the greatest speeches of the last century: "I have just come from Jerusalem to tell the Security Council that Israel, by her independent effort and sacrifice, has passed from serious danger to successful resistance."

Video Link to “Abba Eban, Addressing the United Nations Security Council, June 6, 1967”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DjRCh0laI9I>

It is worth listening to this minute-long excerpt from the speech in order to get a sense of Eban's style.

**Abba Eban, Speech to the United Nations Security Council
on Israel's War with its Arab Neighbors, June 6, 1967**
(The speech was delivered in English and appears here in full)

I thank you, Mr. President, for giving me this opportunity to address the Council.¹ I have just come from Jerusalem to tell the Security Council that Israel, by its independent effort and sacrifice, has passed from serious danger to successful resistance.

Two days ago Israel's condition caused much concern across the humane and friendly world. Israel had reached a sombre hour. Let me try to evoke the point at which our fortunes stood.

An army, greater than any force ever assembled in history in Sinai,² had massed against Israel's southern frontier. Egypt had dismissed the United Nations forces which symbolized the international interest in the maintenance of peace in our region. Nasser³ had provocatively brought five infantry divisions and two armoured divisions up to our very gates; 80,000 men and 900 tanks were poised to move.

A special striking force, comprising an armoured division with at least 200 tanks, was concentrated against Eilat at the Negev's southern tip.⁴ Here was a clear design to cut the southern Negev off from the main body of our State. For Egypt had openly proclaimed that Eilat did not form part of Israel and had predicted that Israel itself would soon expire. The proclamation was empty; the prediction now lies in ruin.

While the main brunt of the hostile threat was focussed on the southern front, an alarming plan of encirclement was under way. With Egypt's initiative and guidance, Israel was already being strangled in its maritime approaches to the whole eastern half of the world. For sixteen years, Israel had been illicitly denied passage in the Suez Canal, despite the Security Council's decision of 1 September 1951 [Resolution 95 (1951)].⁵ And now the creative enterprise of ten patient years which had opened

¹ The UN Security Council, consisting of five permanent members and ten rotating members, is the most powerful decision making body within the United Nations as its decisions, unlike those of the General Assembly, are considered to be binding on member nations of the UN.

² This is a reference to the Sinai Peninsula, which is part of Egypt shares a long border with Israel on the latter's southwest frontier.

³ Gamal Abdel Nasser was the president of Egypt and the leading figure in the Arab world.

⁴ Eilat is the southernmost city in Israel and is located at the southeast edge of the Negev Desert, directly on the Red Sea.

⁵ The Suez Canal is an international waterway that runs through Egypt and enables maritime traffic to go from the Red Sea to the Mediterranean Sea—which is a far faster route than if those vessels had to travel all the way around the southern tip of Africa.

an international route across the Strait of Tiran and the Gulf of Aqaba had been suddenly and arbitrarily choked.⁶ Israel was and is breathing only with a single lung.

Jordan had been intimidated, against its better interest, into joining a defence pact. It is not a defence pact at all: it is an aggressive pact, of which I saw the consequences with my own eyes yesterday in the shells falling upon institutions of health and culture in the City of Jerusalem. Every house and street in Jerusalem now came into the range of fire as a result of Jordan's adherence to this pact; so also did the crowded and pathetically narrow coastal strip in which so much of Israel's life and population is concentrated.⁷

Iraqi troops reinforced Jordanian units in areas immediately facing vital and vulnerable Israel communication centres. Expeditionary forces from Algeria and Kuwait had reached Egyptian territory.⁸ Nearly all the Egyptian forces which had been attempting the conquest of the Yemen had been transferred to the coming assault upon Israel. Syrian units, including artillery, overlooked the Israel villages in the Jordan Valley. Terrorist troops came regularly into our territory to kill, plunder, and set off explosions; the most recent occasion was five days ago.

In short, there was peril for Israel wherever it looked. Its manpower had been hastily mobilized.⁹ Its economy and commerce were beating with feeble pulses. Its streets were dark and empty. There was an apocalyptic air of approaching peril. And Israel faced this danger alone.

We were buoyed up by an unforgettable surge of public sympathy across the world. The friendly Governments expressed the rather ominous hope that Israel would manage to live, but the dominant theme of our condition was danger and solitude.

Now there could be no doubt about what was intended for us. With my very ears I heard President Nasser's speech on 26 May. He said:

"We intend to open a general assault against Israel. This will be total war. Our basic aim will be to destroy Israel."

⁶ The Strait of Tiran and the Gulf of Aqaba lead from the Red Sea to Israel, and enable maritime shipping to reach Eilat.

⁷ This refers to the areas of Israel, such as Tel Aviv, Herzliya, and Netanya, that are on or near the Mediterranean Sea and that were close to the Jordanian-controlled West Bank.

⁸ These expeditionary forces were intended to be part of the assault on Israel.

⁹ Israel's army is reliant in large part on reserve units, consisting of army veterans who are generally part of civilian life but are mobilized in times of war.

On 2 June, the Egyptian Commander in Sinai, General Mortagi, published his Order of the Day, calling on his troops to wage a war of 'destruction against Israel. Here, then, was a systematic, overt, proclaimed design at politicide, the murder of a State.

The policy, the arms, the men had all been brought together, and the State thus threatened with collective assault was itself the last sanctuary of a people which had seen six million of its sons exterminated by a more powerful dictator two decades before.¹⁰

The question then widely asked in Israel and across the world was whether we had not already gone beyond the utmost point of danger. Was there any precedent in world history, for example, for a nation passively to suffer the blockade of its only southern port, involving nearly all its vital fuel, when such acts of war, legally and internationally, have always invited resistance? This was a most unusual patience. It existed because we had acceded to the suggestion of some of the maritime States that we give them scope to concert their efforts in order to find an international solution which would ensure the maintenance of free passage in the Gulf of Aqaba for ships of all nations and of all flags.

As we pursued this avenue of international solution, we wished the world to have no doubt about our readiness to exhaust every prospect, however fragile, of a diplomatic solution - and some of the prospects that were suggested were very fragile indeed.

But as time went on, there was no doubt that our margin of general security was becoming smaller and smaller. Thus, on the morning of 5 June, when Egyptian forces engaged us by air and land, bombarding the villages of Kissufim, Nahal-Oz and Ein Hasheloshah,¹¹ we knew that our limit of safety had been reached, and perhaps passed. In accordance with its inherent right of self-defence as formulated in Article 51 of the United Nations Charter, Israel responded defensively in full strength. Never in the history of nations has armed force been used in a more righteous or compelling cause.

Even when engaged with Egyptian forces, we still hoped to contain the conflict. Egypt was overtly bent on our destruction, but we still hoped that others would not join the aggression. Prime Minister Eshkol,¹² who for weeks had carried the heavy burden of calculation and decision, published and conveyed a message to other neighbouring States proclaiming:

¹⁰ This is a reference to the Holocaust perpetrated by Nazi Germany under the rule of Adolf Hitler.

¹¹ These three villages were near the border with Gaza, which at the time was controlled by Egypt.

¹² Levi Eshkol served as prime minister of Israel beginning in 1963.

"We shall not attack any country unless it opens war on us. Even now, when the mortars speak, we have not given up our quest for peace. We strive to repel all menace of terrorism and any danger of aggression to ensure our security and our legitimate rights."

In accordance with this same policy of attempting to contain the conflict, yesterday I invited General Bull, the Chief of Staff of the [UN] Truce Supervision Organization, to inform the heads of the Jordanian State that Israel had no desire to expand the conflict beyond the unfortunate dimensions that it had already assumed and that if Israel were not attacked on the Jordan side, it would not attack and would act only in self-defence. It reached my ears that this message had been duly and faithfully conveyed and received. Nevertheless, Jordan decided to join the Egyptian posture against Israel and opened artillery attacks across the whole long frontier, including Jerusalem. Those attacks are still in progress.

To the appeal of Prime Minister Eshkol to avoid any further extension of the conflict, Syria answered at 12.25 yesterday morning by bombing Megiddo from the air and bombing Degania at 12.40 with artillery fire and kibbutz Ein Hammifrats and Kurdani with long-range guns.¹³ But Jordan embarked on a much more total assault by artillery and aircraft along the entire front, with special emphasis on Jerusalem, to whose dangerous and noble ordeal yesterday I come to bear personal witness.

There has been bombing of houses; there has been a hit on the great new National Museum of Art; there has been a hit on the University and on Shaare Zedek, the first hospital ever to have been established outside the ancient walls. Is this not an act of vandalism that deserves the condemnation of all mankind? And in the Knesset building, whose construction had been movingly celebrated by the entire democratic world ten months ago, the Israel Cabinet and Parliament met under heavy gunfire, whose echoes mingled at the end of our meeting with Hatikvah, the anthem of hope.¹⁴

Thus throughout the day and night of 5 June, the Jordan which we had expressly invited to abstain from needless slaughter became, to our surprise, and still remains, the most intense of all the belligerents; and death and injury, as so often in history, stalk Jerusalem's streets.

When the approaching Egyptian aircraft appeared on our radar screens, soon to be followed by artillery attacks on our villages near the Gaza Strip, I instructed Mr. Rafael¹⁵ to inform the Security Council, in accordance with the provisions of Article 51 of the Charter. I know that that involved arousing you, Mr. President, at a most

¹³ All these towns are located close to the Golan Heights, which at the time were controlled by Syria.

¹⁴ "Hatikvah," which means "The Hope," is Israel's national anthem.

¹⁵ Gideon Rafael was Israel's Ambassador to the United Nations.

uncongenial hour of the night, but we felt that the Security Council should be most urgently seized.

I should, however, be less than frank if I were to conceal the fact that the Government and people of Israel have been disconcerted by some aspects of the United Nations role in this conflict. The sudden withdrawal of the United Nations Emergency Force was not accompanied, as it should have been, by due international consultations on the consequences of that withdrawal. Moreover, Israeli interests were affected; they were not adequately explored. No attempt was made, little time given, to help Israel to surmount grave prejudice to its vital interests consequent on that withdrawal. After all, a new confrontation of forces suddenly arose. It suddenly had to be met and at Sharm el-Sheikh at the entrance to the Gulf of Aqaba, the Strait of Tiran, legality walked out and blockade walked in.¹⁶ The peace of the world trembled. And thus the United Nations had somehow been put into a position of leaving Sinai safe for belligerency.

It is not, I think, a question of sovereignty that is here involved. The United Nations has a right to ask that, when it assumes a function, the termination of that function shall not take place in conditions that would lead to anti-Charter situations. I do not raise this point in order to linger upon that which is past, but because of Israel's general attitude to the peace-keeping functions of this Organization. And I confess that my own attitude and those of my colleagues and of my fellow citizens to the peacekeeping functions of the United Nations have been traumatically affected by this experience.

The United Nations Emergency Force rendered distinguished service. Nothing became it less than the manner of its departure. All gratitude and appreciation are owed to the individuals who sustained its action. And if in the course of the recent combats United Nations personnel have fallen dead or wounded - as they have - then I join my voice in an expression of the most sincere regret.

The problem of the future role of a United Nations presence in conflicts such as these is being much debated. But we must ask ourselves a question that has arisen as a result of this experience. People in our country and in many countries ask: What is the use of a United Nations presence if it is in effect an umbrella which is taken away as soon as it begins to rain? Surely, then, future arrangements for peace-keeping must depend more on the agreement and the implementation of the parties themselves than on machinery which is totally at the mercy of the host country, so totally at its mercy as to be the instrument of its policies, whatever those policies may be.

¹⁶ Sharm al-Sheikh was an Egyptian town located on the Red Sea and in a strategic location for blocking shipping going through the Straits of Tiran and the Gulf of Aqaba.

We have lived through three dramatic weeks. Those weeks, I think, have brought into clear view the main elements of tension and also the chief promise of relaxed tension in the future. The first link in the chain was the series of sabotage acts emanating from Syria. In October of 1966, the Security Council was already seized of this problem and a majority of its member States found it possible and necessary to draw attention to the Syrian Government's responsibility for altering that situation. Scarcely a day passed without a mine, a bomb, a hand-grenade or a mortar exploding on Israel's soil, sometimes with lethal or crippling effects, always with an unsettling psychological influence. In general, fourteen or fifteen such incidents would accumulate before a response was considered necessary, and this ceaseless accumulation of terrorist sabotage incidents in the name of what was called "popular war," together with responses which in the long run sometimes became inevitable, were for a long period the main focus of tension in the Middle East.

But then there came a graver source of tension in mid-May, when abnormal troop concentrations were observed in the Sinai Peninsula. For the ten years of relative stability beginning with March 1957 and ending with May 1967, the Sinai Desert had been free of Egyptian troops. In other words, a natural geographic barrier, a largely uninhabited space, separated the main forces of the two sides. It is true that in terms of sovereignty and law, any State has a right to put its armies in any part of its territory that it chooses. This, however, is not a legal question: it is a political and a security question.

Experience in many parts of the world, not least in our own, demonstrates that massive armies in close proximity to each other, against a background of a doctrine of belligerency and accompanying threats by one army to annihilate the other, constitute an inflammatory situation.

We were puzzled in Israel by the relative lack of preoccupation on the part of friendly Governments and international agencies with this intense concentration which found its reflection in precautionary concentrations on our side. My Government proposed, I think at least two weeks ago, the concept of a parallel and reciprocal reduction of forces on both sides of the frontier. We elicited no response, and certainly no action.

To these grave sources of tension - the sabotage and terrorist movement, emanating mostly from Syria, and the heavy troop concentrations accompanied by dire, apocalyptic threats in Sinai - there was added in the third week of May the most electric shock of all, namely the closure of the international waterway consisting of the Strait of Tiran and the Gulf of Aqaba. It is not difficult, I think, to understand why this incident had a more drastic impact than any other. In 1957 the maritime

nations, within the framework of the United Nations General Assembly, correctly enunciated the doctrine of free and innocent passage through the Strait.

Now, when that doctrine was proclaimed - and incidentally, not challenged by the Egyptian representative at that time - it was little more than an abstract principle for the maritime world. For Israel it was a great but still unfulfilled prospect; it was not yet a reality. But during the ten years in which we and the other States of the maritime community have relied upon that doctrine and upon established usage, the principle has become a reality consecrated by hundreds of sailings under dozens of flags and the establishment of a whole complex of commerce and industry and communication. A new dimension has been added to the map of the world's communications, and on that dimension we have constructed Israel's bridge towards the friendly States of Asia and Africa, a network of relationships which is the chief pride of Israel in the second decade of its independence.

All this, then, had grown up as an effective usage under the United Nations flag. Does Mr. Nasser really think that he can come upon the scene in ten minutes and cancel the established legal usage and interests of ten years?

There was in this wanton act a quality of malice. For surely the closing of the Strait of Tiran gave no benefit whatever to Egypt except the perverse joy of inflicting injury on others. It was an anarchic act, because it showed a total disregard for the law of nations, the application of which in this specific case had not been challenged for ten years. And it was, in the literal sense, an act of arrogance, because there are other nations in Asia and East Africa that trade with the Port of Eilat, as they have every right to do, through the Strait of Tiran and across the Gulf of Aqaba. Other sovereign States from Japan to Ethiopia, from Thailand to Uganda, from Cambodia to Madagascar, have a sovereign right to decide for themselves whether they wish or do not wish to trade with Israel. These countries are not colonies of Cairo. They can trade with Israel or not trade with Israel as they wish, and President Nasser is not the policeman of other African and Asian States.

Here then was a wanton intervention in the sovereign rights of other States in the eastern half of the world to decide for themselves whether or not they wish to establish trade relations with either or both of the two ports at the head of the Gulf of Aqaba.¹⁷

When we examine, then, the implications of this act, we have no cause to wonder that the international shock was great. There was another reason too for that shock. Blockades have traditionally been regarded, in the pre-Charter parlance, as acts of war. To blockade, after all, is to attempt strangulation; and sovereign States are

¹⁷ The Israeli port is Eilat and the nearby Jordanian port is Aqaba.

entitled not to have their trade strangled. To understand how the State of Israel felt, one has merely to look around this table and imagine, for example, a foreign Power forcibly closing New York or Montreal, Boston or Marseille, Toulon or Copenhagen, Rio or Tokyo or Bombay harbour.¹⁸ How would your Governments react? What would you do? How long would you wait?

But Israel waited because of its confidence that the other maritime Powers and countries interested in this new trading pattern would concert their influence in order to re-establish a legal situation and to liquidate this blockade. We concerted action with them not because Israel's national interest was here abdicated. There will not be, there cannot be, an Israel without Eilat. We cannot be expected to return to a dwarfed stature, with our face to the Mediterranean alone. In law and in history, peace and blockades have never co-existed. How could it be expected that the blockade of Eilat and a relaxation of tension in the Middle East could ever be brought into harmony?

These then were the three main elements in the tension: the sabotage movement; the blockade of the port; and, perhaps more imminent than anything else, this vast and purposeful encirclement movement, against the background of an authorized presidential statement announcing that the objective of the encirclement was to bring about the destruction and the annihilation of a sovereign State.

These acts taken together - the blockade, the dismissal of the United Nations Emergency Force, and the heavy concentration in Sinai - effectively disrupted the status quo which had ensured a relative stability on the Egyptian-Israel frontier for ten years. I do not use the words "relative stability" lightly, for in fact while those elements in the Egyptian-Israel relationship existed there was not one single incident of violence between Egypt and Israel for ten years. But suddenly this status quo, this pattern of mutually accepted stability, was smashed to smithereens.

It is now the task of the Governments concerned to elaborate the new conditions of their co-existence. I think that much of this work should be done directly by these Governments themselves. Surely, after what has happened we must have better assurance than before, for Israel and for the Middle East, of peaceful co-existence. The question is whether there is any reason to believe that such a new era may yet come to pass. If I am a little sanguine on this point, it is because of a conviction that men and nations do behave wisely once they have exhausted all other alternatives. Surely the other alternatives of war and belligerency have now been exhausted. And what has anybody gained from that? But in order that the new system of inter-State relationships may flourish in the Middle East, it is important that certain principles

¹⁸ Eban chose these examples because each of these was a major city in a country that was a member of the Security Council and whose representatives were present during this debate.

be applied above and beyond the cease-fire to which the Security Council has given its unanimous support.

Let me then say here that Israel welcomes the appeal for the cease-fire as formulated in this Resolution.¹⁹ But I must point out that the implementation depends on the absolute and sincere acceptance and co-operation of the other parties, which, in our view, are responsible for the present situation. And in conveying this Resolution to my colleagues, I must at this moment point out that these other Governments have not used the opportunity yet to clarify their intentions.

I have said that the situation to be constructed after the cease-fire must depend on certain principles. The first of these principles surely must be the acceptance of Israel's statehood and the total elimination of the fiction of its non-existence. It would seem to me that after 3,000 years the time has arrived to accept Israel's nationhood as a fact, for here is the only State in the international community which has the same territory, speaks the same language, and upholds the same faith as it did 3,000 years ago.

And if, as everybody knows to be the fact, the universal conscience was in the last week or two most violently shaken at the prospect of danger to Israel, it was not only because there seemed to be a danger to a State, but also, I think, because the State was Israel, with all that this ancient name evokes, teaches, symbolizes, and inspires. How grotesque would be an international community which found room for 122 sovereign units and which did not acknowledge the sovereignty of that people which had given nationhood its deepest significance and its most enduring grace.²⁰

No wonder, then, that when danger threatened we could hear a roar of indignation sweep across the world, that men in progressive movements and members of the scientific and humanistic cultures joined together in sounding an alarm bell about an issue that vitally affected the human conscience. And no wonder, correspondingly, that a deep and universal sense of satisfaction and relief has accompanied the news of Israel's gallant and successful resistance.

But the central point remains the need to secure an authentic intellectual recognition by our neighbours of Israel's deep roots in the Middle Eastern reality. There is an intellectual tragedy in the failure of Arab leaders to come to grips, however reluctantly, with the depth and authenticity of Israel's roots in the life, the history, the spiritual experience, and the culture of the Middle East.

¹⁹ Eban is referring to a Resolution for a cease-fire being considered by the UN Security Council.

²⁰ Eban is referring to the 122 sovereign states that were members of the United Nations.

This, then, is the first axiom. A much more conscious and uninhibited acceptance of Israel's statehood is an axiom requiring no demonstration, for there will never be a Middle East without an independent and sovereign State of Israel in its midst.

The second principle must be that of the peaceful settlement of disputes. The Resolution thus adopted falls within the concept of the peaceful settlement of disputes. I have already said that much could be done if the Governments of the area would embark much more on direct contacts. They must find their way to each other. After all, when there is conflict between them they come together face to face. Why should they not come together face to face to solve the conflict? And perhaps on some occasions it would not be a bad idea to have the solution before, and therefore instead of, the conflict.

When the Council discusses what is to happen after the cease-fire, we hear many formulas: back to 1956, back to 1948 - I understand our neighbours would wish to turn the clock back to 1947.²¹ The fact is, however, that most clocks move forward and not backward, and this, I think, should be the case with the clock of Middle Eastern peace - not backward to belligerency, but forward to peace.

The point was well made this evening by the representative of Argentina, who said: the cease-fire should be followed immediately by the most intensive efforts to bring about a just and lasting peace in the Middle East. In a similar sense, the representative of Canada warned us against merely reproducing the old positions of conflict, without attempting to settle the underlying issues of Arab-Israel co-existence. After all, many things in recent days have been mixed up with each other. Few things are what they were. And in order to create harmonious combinations of relationships, it is inevitable that the States should come together in negotiation.

Another factor in the harmony that we would like to see in the Middle East relates to external Powers. From these, and especially from the greatest amongst them, the small States of the Middle East - and most of them are small - ask for a rigorous support, not for individual States, but for specific principles; not to be for one State against other States, but to be for peace against war, for free commerce against belligerency, for the peaceful settlement of disputes against violent irredentist threats; in other words, to exercise an even-handed support for the integrity and

²¹ "Back to 1956" presumably refers to the conditions that obtained prior to the Sinai Campaign of October-November 1956, in which Israel, joined by Britain and France, defeated Egypt. "Back to 1948" refers to the conditions that obtained as of May 14, 1948, when Israel was first established, and these included Israel's having been assigned only 55% of Mandatory Palestine, while at the conclusion of the War of Independence Israel controlled 79%. "Back to 1947" presumably refers to the situation prior to the United Nations partition resolution of November 1947 calling for the establishment of a Jewish State and an Arab State in Palestine.

independence of States and for the rights of States under the Charter of the United Nations and other sources of international law.

There are not two categories of States. The United Arab Republic,²² Iraq, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon - not one of these has a single ounce or milligram of statehood which does not adhere in equal measures to Israel itself.

It is important that States outside our region apply a balanced attitude, that they do not exploit temporary tensions and divergencies in the issues of global conflict, that they do not seek to win gains by inflaming fleeting passions, and that they strive to make a balanced distribution of their friendship amongst the States of the Middle East. Now whether all the speeches of all the Great Powers this evening meet this criterion, everybody, of course, can judge for himself. I do not propose to answer in detail all the observations of the representative of the Soviet Union. I had the advantage of hearing the same things in identical language a few days ago from his colleague, the Soviet Ambassador in Israel. I must confess that I was no more convinced this evening than I was the day before yesterday about the validity of this most vehement and one-sided denunciation.

But surely world opinion, before whose tribunal this debate unrolls, can solve this question by posing certain problems to itself. Who was it that attempted to destroy a neighbouring State in 1948, Israel or its neighbours? Who now closes an international waterway to the port of a neighbouring State, Israel or the United Arab Republic? Does Israel refuse to negotiate a peace settlement with the Arab States, or do they refuse to do so with it? Who disrupted the 1957 pattern of stability, Israel or Egypt? Did troops of Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon, Kuwait and Algeria surround Israel in this menacing confrontation, or has any distinguished representative seen some vast Israel colossus surrounding the area between Morocco and Kuwait?

I raise these points of elementary logic. Of course, a Great Power can take refuge in its power from the exigencies of logic. All of us in our youth presumably recounted La Fontaine's fable, "*La raison du plus fort est toujours la meilleure.*"²³ But here, after all, there is nobody who is more or less strong than others; we sit here around the table on the concept of sovereign equality. But I think we have an equal duty to bring substantive proof for any denunciation that we make, each of the other.

I would say in conclusion that these are, of course, still grave times. And yet they may perhaps have a fortunate issue. This could be the case if those who for some reason decided so violently, three weeks ago, to disrupt the status quo would ask

²² The United Arab Republic was the full, formal name for Egypt.

²³ This translates to "The reason of the strongest is always the best."

themselves what the results and benefits have been. As he looks around him at the arena of battle, at the wreckage of planes and tanks, at the collapse of intoxicated hopes, might not an Egyptian ruler ponder whether anything was achieved by that disruption? What has it brought but strife, conflict with other powerful interests, and the stern criticism of progressive men throughout the world?

I think that Israel has in recent days proved its steadfastness and vigour. It is now willing to demonstrate its instinct for peace. Let us build a new system of relationships from the wreckage of the old. Let us discern across the darkness the vision of a better and a brighter dawn.