

Political and Military Situation

Introduction

As the Ninth Knesset approached the end of its term, Prime Minister Begin once more delivered a statement on the political and military situation, introducing a lengthy debate. The following is one passage from the prime minister's statement, referring to the situation in Lebanon and foreshadowing events which would occupy a great deal of the attention of the following Knesset, the Tenth.

Sitting 442 of the Ninth Knesset

11 May 1981 (7 Iyar 5741)

The Prime Minister, M. Begin: Mr. Speaker, Members of the Knesset, three weeks ago the Christians of northern Lebanon reached the breaking point. Not the fighters, who have received Israel-made arms of various kinds, the best and most efficient in the world. That sacred task was begun by the government headed by MK Rabin. My government continued and even increased that essential aid, and the Christian fighters in both northern and southern Lebanon are fine, fearless fellows whose spirit has not been broken.

The civilian population was at the breaking point. The Syrians treated the population of Lebanon as the Nazis did that of Europe. While repeating what I said on former occasions, I would like to note that a vicious person has leaked information from a certain official meeting at which I allegedly said that the Syrians had treated the Christians of Lebanon as the Nazis treated the Jews. I would never say such a thing.... To this entire generation I say once more that just as God created man and man created Satan, the cruel acts of bestiality perpetrated against the Jews of Europe by the Germans under National Socialism have never been paralleled. But in this case the civilian population has been maltreated. Zahleh has been treated as Coventry was, Beirut as Rotterdam. With my own eyes I saw the Stukas -

T. Toubi (Democratic Front for Peace and Equality): It doesn't matter what you said, what matters is what you set alight. You gave them the order to open fire in Lebanon. You failed and they failed and that is why you are threatening war now. It doesn't matter what you said, what matters is what you did. You set a conflagration.

The Speaker, I. Berman: MK Toubi, there are party group statements and you will have a chance to say what you have to say. I ask you not to disturb other speakers.

The Prime Minister, M. Begin: MK Toubi, by virtue of the fact that we have both been Knesset Members since the First Knesset I ask you to grant me the freedom to speak. I thank you for that kindness....

T. Toubi (Democratic Front for Peace and Equality): Don't make war. By virtue of your being a member of the government listen to the appeal not to make war.

The Prime Minister, M. Begin: In a little while I will listen to you, for you have the freedom to speak too. But I think that I have the same right as you....And so, as I was saying, the civilian population of northern Lebanon was at the breaking point. The Syrians were shelling Zahleh and Beirut with cannon with a range of thirty miles, the heaviest Soviet cannon. Houses collapsed, burying their inhabitants, men, women and children. There was no mercy for them. There were no hospitals, water or food. Most

of the Christians fled from Beirut to the mountains, but from Zahleh it was impossible to flee because the Syrians surrounded it with tanks and cannon....In Zahleh alone 500 people were killed and 1,000 wounded.

There was a day, so I heard at first hand, when they could hold out no longer. I was told that fifty men, women and children were huddled together in one room which they thought was protected. How long can fifty human beings breathe the same air? That is the reason why the Lebanese Christians were at the breaking point three weeks ago.

Then we decided not to remain on the sidelines. Our Air Force downed two helicopters. If there had been ten they would all have been downed. Then those helicopter flights over Mount Snin which had killed Christians and brought soldiers and weapons stopped, and since then there has been a substantial change. On the basis of the information which has reached us, it can be said that Israel's action on that day saved the Lebanese Christians from complete moral collapse, which would have enabled the Syrians to gain control of all northern Lebanon and then move south.

W. Haj Yahya (Sheli): And also brought the missiles there.

The Prime Minister, M. Begin: Kindly do not interrupt me; you are a very new MK.

C. Biton (Democratic Front for Peace and Equality): What? are you the schoolteacher here?

W. Haj Yahya (Sheli): I have the right to speak out.

The Speaker, I. Berman: MK Haj Yahya, you are listed to speak, I do not know why you have to interrupt.

W. Haj Yahya (Sheli): I'm not interrupting, I have the right-

The Prime Minister, M. Begin: You are a new MK, be so kind as to behave. In this context of our having saved the Christians on the day of their crisis, the greatest they have experienced in the last five years, I would like to clarify to the Knesset our moral obligation to them, as I perceive it. I would like to state that to the best of my understanding it is our moral duty to ensure that the Christians of Lebanon, in the north and the south, are not destroyed by any enemy. I know that there are those who disagree with this view. I hold fast to it.

I think that that is why we are both Jews and Zionists. When Herzl established the journal of the World Zionist Organization he called it "The World," not even "Zion," to emphasize the universal nature of our movement, the liberation movement of Israel. And when Herzl wrote his book, he noted that when the day came, if we had our own Jewish state, it would work to free the blacks. He wrote those things in the nineteenth century. One could ask what we have to do with freeing blacks....

M. Wilner (Democratic Front for Peace and Equality): Free the Palestinians. There's bondage.

The Prime Minister, M. Begin: You will not budge me one inch with your vicious interruptions....Judaism is both national and universal by nature....That is why the vision of the end of days speaks of all the nations streaming to the mountain of the

Lord. That is why the philosopher and historian, Professor Klausner, spoke of Judaism and humanism. We cannot remain on the sidelines, nothing human is alien to us.

S. Aloni (Citizens' Rights Movement): At what price-our children?

The Prime Minister, M. Begin: And that is why we will continue to protect the Christian minority from destruction.

W. Haj Yahya (Sheli): See to your own country, see to Ikrit and Biram....

The Prime Minister, M. Begin: But while we do not accept the doctrine of *sacro egoismo*, we are well able to see to our own national security interests, as we do. I will inform the Knesset as to the number of missiles brought into Lebanon and situated on the Lebanese-Syrian border. In Lebanon itself there are today five SA-6 missile batteries, with another four near the border and two on the Lebanese-Syrian border. Until the day before yesterday there was only one SA-6 missile battery on that border. This morning there are already two SA-3 batteries on the Lebanese-Syrian border. Until two days ago there was only one such battery there. There is also an SA-9, which was brought to Lebanon by the Libyans and is also operated by them. That makes a total of fourteen batteries of ground-to-air missiles.

On Thursday, April 30, on the basis of the authority vested in me by the government, I ordered the Chief of the General Staff to destroy the three SA-6 batteries which were then in Lebanon. The action was due to start at 11 a.m. At 10:30 I was told that weather conditions did not permit this, and the action was postponed to 1 p.m. At 12:30 I was told that the weather did not permit this, and the action was postponed to 3 p.m. I was then informed once again that the weather did not permit this, and the action was postponed to the following day.

Z. Katz (Alignment): Is the Prime Minister going to continue with this lack of national responsibility?

The Prime Minister, M. Begin: I will continue with this course. Neither you nor anyone else will teach me national responsibility. Be quiet....

S. Aloni (Citizens' Rights Movement): You are starting a war. I do not want war there.

The Prime Minister, M. Begin: Kindly let me speak.

T. Ziad (Democratic Front for Peace and Equality): You want war. You have already decided on war, on bloodshed.

The Prime Minister, M. Begin: The Communists want peace. That's true in Afghanistan. They want peace....On May 1 I received a letter from Secretary of State Haig in which he asked for time in which to make use of the diplomatic route....I summoned a meeting of the Ministerial Defense Committee for Friday morning. After a thorough discussion, we decided to accede to the American request. I informed the U.S. Ambassador of this. We calculated how long it would take, because the decision

was-due to the danger of the accumulation of more ground-to air missile batteries-that we would not wait longer than three or four days, until Monday evening.

Z. Katz (Alignment): What did you decide?

The Prime Minister, M. Begin: We said that if the Americans brought us an undertaking from the Syrian government that it would remove the missiles we would be prepared to wait another week for it to fulfill its undertaking. Meanwhile additional missiles were prepared. On Tuesday morning the U.S. Ambassador requested an urgent meeting with me. He brought me a personal letter from President Reagan. Naturally, I cannot reveal its contents....I can tell the Knesset that for years no Israeli government has received such a friendly letter from a U.S. President.

M. Shamir (Tehiya): You said the same about Carter....

The Prime Minister, M. Begin: Why can't you listen patiently...? I can, however, inform the Knesset and the nation of part of my reply to President Reagan. I will read it in the English original:

And what, indeed, is the danger? In addition to all else, when our pilots embark to do what they will have to do for the sake of the most vital interests of our security, which is an integral part of the security of the free world, some of them may be downed, killed or taken prisoner. If any of them fall into captivity they will suffer the most cruel torture which, sometimes, the most valiant soldier of the battlefield is incapable of withstanding. I speak, Mr. President, in the name of experience.

These are dangers and risks we take upon ourselves by accepting a further delay of action, which we do in consideration of your personal request. As you see, Mr. President, we do not on this occasion suggest any date. But it is my solemn duty, responsible as I am for the lives of our citizens and soldiers, to emphasize that it cannot but be a relatively short period of time. I must add that the responsibility which I take upon myself is grave indeed and the risks involved are awesome. Yet, as I have already said, we have decided to inform you that your representatives have, from our point of view, additional time to try the diplomatic route.

Z. Katz (Alignment): One should speak Hebrew in the Knesset.

The Prime Minister, M. Begin: Additional time was granted to try the diplomatic route. In another two hours I will meet with President Reagan's representative, Mr. Philip Habib, who is, as his name indicates, a wise and dedicated man, and will receive a report from him of his visits to Beirut and Damascus and his meetings with Moslems and Christians and with Syrian leaders....

I would now like to make a personal appeal to the Syrian President. Let us speak as one enemy to another. That formula is not of my choosing. Almost four years ago, when I presented the new government to the Knesset, I appealed to President Sadat of Egypt, King Hussein of Jordan and President Assad of Syria and invited them to come to Jerusalem or to meet with me in their capitals or a neutral place, either in public or away from the glare of the lights, in order to discuss peace. One of them came to Jerusalem....

Naturally, there are fundamental differences on each of Israel's borders. But we want peace with all our neighbors. And that was my appeal. But since the President of Syria declined to reply, maintains a state of belligerency with Israel and claims that he will lead other Arabs-particularly those who have left the Land of Israel because they sought to rise up against us and destroy us and failed in that - into battle to destroy Israel, I have no choice but to speak to him as to an enemy.

My first appeal is: release the Jews in your country. Why should you hold them hostage? They number only 3,000 or 4,000, the surviving remnant of a once great community which made a great contribution to Jewish culture. They wish to be allowed to go free and you hold them in a ghetto and in fear. Why should you torment them in this way? Almost all the Arab countries, even Iraq, whose leader is a blood-thirsty tyrant who killed his best friends with his own hands in order to gain control of that country, let its Jews go. Yet you still detain 4,000 Jews, men, women and children, in a ghetto and do not let them go.

Some countries have learned the moral lesson of the 1930s and 1940s, such as distant Australia and Canada, which are prepared to take them in. Why should you continue to hold them in fear, in a ghetto, as hostages? Let them go....

My second appeal is: Mr. Assad, President of Syria, you have engaged in what is known as "brinkmanship." Change your course. It will bring you no dishonor. We do not want your dishonor. It will bring you honor, for you will be serving the interests of peace. Therefore, draw back from the edge of the abyss, withdraw the missiles which should not be where you have placed them, remove your soldiers from Mount Snin and return to the status quo ante. Then all mankind will breathe more easily and will have good reason to be grateful to you.

That is my honest, open appeal to you, without concealing anything, as one speaks to an enemy: restore the status quo ante in Lebanon and everything will fall back into place.

W. Ha,j Yahya (Sheli): Will you stop the flights over Lebanon?

The Prime Minister, M. Begin: Submit a parliamentary question and I will reply. The subject is serious enough to warrant a special question....But if, heaven forefend, this appeal falls on deaf ears, I must once again explain our national security interests. Whoever controls Mount Snin and the skies of Lebanon will control all Lebanon up to the Lebanon-Israel border. There is no doubt of that. Then Israel will be in danger and war will be inevitable, but on the worst possible terms for Israel. Consequently, we must enable anyone of good will who wishes to solve this crisis by diplomatic means to do so. But on no account can we countenance those missiles and the conquest of the mountain, because whoever controls it controls all Lebanon. Any child who can read a map will admit that. Hence our concern, anxiety and decisions of the past and, if necessary, of the future too.

I would like to commend the leader of the opposition, MK Peres, who, after talking to me and the chairman of the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, MK Arens, about the ground-to-air missiles, stated that the diplomatic course should be utilized to the full, but if it were to prove fruitless we should not flinch from using military means in order to get the missiles withdrawn. On that point there is national consensus.

W. Haj Yahya (Sheli): What kind of opposition is that?

The Prime Minister, M. Begin: We don't need you. That's what he said. Misha, didn't Shimon say that in your presence?

W. Haj Yahya (Sheli): I'm here by right, not on sufferance.

The Prime Minister, M. Begin: I didn't say that you were here on sufferance....This national agreement

M. Wilner (Democratic Front for Peace and Equality): There is no such agreement. This is the agreement of warmongers.

The Prime Minister, M. Begin: We don't need you. We don't want your agreement. We didn't ask for it.

M. Wilner (Democratic Front for Peace and Equality): There's no such agreement

The Prime Minister, M. Begin: Mr. Speaker, I request your protection. Mr. Wilner, why are you shouting? Go to the great hall in Moscow, you'll get thunderous applause there, everyone will stand in your honor, even Khrushchev, no, sorry

M. Wilner (Democratic Front for Peace and Equality): You are a demagogue. You were in occupied territory and said as "the son of Hasiya" that Israel would never leave the Golan Heights. You are a warmonger. You are bringing disaster on Israel....

The Prime Minister, M. Begin: I will not raise my voice to out-shout MK Wilner. This is the Knesset, after all, and one should show respect for it. Here one should speak with mutual respect. Why all this shouting? Do you have any voters at all? Thank MK Toubi for your seat. The national agreement on this point is very important and it exists. We do not need certain party groups for the consensus....

S. Aloni (Citizens' Rights Movement): But our children serve in the army too. You've got a nerve. You're sending our children to die.

The Prime Minister, M. Begin: Ah, good day to you. Why is that lady shouting?

S. Aloni (Citizens' Rights Movement): Why aren't we needed? Don't you need our children for the war?

The Prime Minister, M. Begin: Did I say that to you? It's the Communists I don't want. You are warmly invited to join the consensus.

T. Toubi (Democratic Front for Peace and Equality): Aren't Communists needed for the war?

The Prime Minister, M. Begin: I know what Communists are needed for. You have not been to the parts of Russia I have visited. The Communists need Afghanistan, Mozambique, Angola -

T. Toubi (Democratic Front for Peace and Equality): You are distorting what the Communists want. The Communists want peace between nations while you want war and hostility and bloodshed....

The Prime Minister, M. Begin: At present there are several points of agreement between Israel and the U.S., namely:

A. Both countries and peoples are allies. When the Secretary of State was here, at a joint meeting with him and his advisors, we told him that we were not happy about the phrase "strategic asset." If it means that we are the opposite of a strategic burden that is one thing. But what is an asset? It is a commercial term. That is why we told him that in our view we were friends and allies. That evening the Foreign Minister gave a dinner in honor of the Secretary of State where the latter said that the U.S. and Israel were allies and had "a permanent alliance."...We were very glad to hear that phrase. Both our countries agree that we have a permanent alliance.

B. The second point of agreement is our position regarding the role played by Syria in Lebanon. Both the U.S. and Israel do not regard Syria as constituting an expeditionary force for bringing peace or as a stabilizing force.

C. Both countries hold identical views regarding the terrorist organizations.

D. There must be active opposition to murderous terrorism wherever it may be.

E. We oppose the expansion of Soviet imperialism anywhere in the world, especially in the Middle East.

Those are the five points of agreement between us and the U.S., and I can say that I do not remember a time when there was such wide and deep agreement between our two peoples and countries.

There is a problem, however. The present U.S. administration, while more friendly than many of its predecessors, has decided to sell Saudi Arabia offensive attachments for the F-15 as well as AWACS airplanes, which are extremely sophisticated planes unlike any anywhere else in the world. Perhaps the Russians have something similar, I do not know. We oppose the American-Saudi deal unequivocally. There is great danger concerning the offensive attachments, particularly the additional fuel tanks for the F-15s, which are currently held in the eastern part of Saudi Arabia. But who can prevent them from landing at Tabouk, the military base just across the Bay of Solomon, just opposite Eilat, one night? Or stop them flying from Tabouk to Israel one day?

M. Shamir (Tehiya): If you had left the airfields in the Sinai that could have been prevented. But you abandoned the Sinai

The Prime Minister, M. Begin: Alright, alright. We know that we are in disagreement....And so, it can land right opposite Eilat, though its flying range is relatively limited. If those planes receive additional fuel tanks they will be able to get to Tel Aviv and return to Saudi Arabia without landing or refueling. That is a direct danger to the civilian population at the center of the Land of Israel. If the Saudis were to receive the AWACS, everything we did; in the air and at sea, would be known. There have been important Americans who have said to us: what do you care? You have such a wonderful Air Force. If those planes are brought from the eastern part of Saudi Arabia to the border with Israel, such as to Tabouk, you'll simply down them. At the same time they told us that for a long time after the Saudis receive the AWACS planes they will be flown by Americans alongside the Saudis. What strange advice did we receive from Washington? That we should down planes, thereby killing both their

Saudi and American crews, the latter being our friends. That is very strange advice which we cannot accept.

We were also told that we should not worry because the Saudis would get the AWACS only in another five years. So what will happen after five years? Does a nation live on borrowed time? Five years also pass, so what good does that do us...? That is why we say that we will continue to oppose the American-Saudi deal unequivocally. That does not mean that Israel must come into conflict with the U.S. There is no conflict. We are friends and allies, but sometimes even allies disagree on certain points....

I therefore have the honor of announcing that we will continue to work against this Saudi-American deal, which endangers the security of the Jewish nation in Israel. The Administration has not yet given the required statement to the Senate and the House of Representatives. If it is given there are fifty days in which to register disagreement. There is serious opposition to this transaction in both Houses. I can say without hesitation that we will appeal to all our friends in the U.S. and also ask the Congress to consider this and withhold its consent to the deal. I also have the honor of asking our great friend President Reagan to reconsider the matter and refrain from going to the House of Representatives and the Senate, thereby averting grave danger to a country whose security and welfare the U.S. genuinely wishes to uphold.

I would also like to note that Sheikh Zaki Yamani visited the U.S. and made a foolish joke about a camel and a mouse, but we will not argue with him about that, we will not go down to his level. After that, however, he returned to his country and said that the real danger to the Middle East was Israel, not the U.S.S.R. If that is so, against whom will all that sophisticated weaponry being supplied to Saudi Arabia be directed? Doubtless against the real danger, that is, Israel, not the U.S.S.R.... The situation is absolutely clear, and our American friends will rally, I am sure, to enable us to live in security and peace.

On the other hand, there is an unprecedented arms race in the Middle East, by both the West and the East, everyone competing to supply arms. Only yesterday we learned that the Chancellor of Austria, Mr. Kreisky, sold four hundred tanks to Saudi Arabia. He had originally intended to sell one hundred tanks, but the manufacturer told him to try and sell more, so he did....I have heard it on good evidence that the ruling princes of Saudi Arabia are unbelievably rich. It is a basically corrupt society which the German Chancellor has described as Germany's greatest ally after the U.S. and the Nato countries. So why not sell four hundred tanks if you can...? What can one expect of Austria which, on the day of the Anschluss, forced almost all the Jewish women of Vienna to take mops and wash the streets or the sidewalks. Austria, which many people claim was even worse than Germany during the Holocaust, if that is possible, Austria, the country of Eichmann, the country which is led by that proud Jew, Mr. Bruno Kreisky, is selling arms to Saudi Arabia.

S. Aloni (Citizens' Rights Movement): He is a head of state. Why do you talk about him in that way...?

The Prime Minister, M. Begin: I would also like to say a few words about the peace agreement between Israel and Egypt and the statement made by Dr. Ghali, the Egyptian Minister for Foreign Affairs. He said that the defense agreements between Egypt and the Arab countries take precedence over the peace treaty with Israel, and also that if war were to break out between Israel and an Arab country there is a possibility-he did retract this later, it's true-that Egypt would join forces with the Arab

country. That is in direct contradiction of the terms of the peace treaty between Israel and Egypt....I hope that Mr. Ghali will realize his mistake, and that what he said was said without the knowledge and agreement of President Sadat....

I hereby say to the Americans from this podium, and the Americans will tell the Egyptians, that since it is impossible to establish a U.N. force because of the Soviet veto, an international force should be set up on the basis of the identical letter sent by President Carter to President Sadat and myself....It must be a serious force, not observers, in the south and the north so that Israel's security and freedom of navigation in the Straits of Tiran may be preserved....That letter of President Carter's was an integral part of the peace treaty between Israel and Egypt....If that force is not set up we will remain on the Ras Muhammad-EI Arish line....

There is tension; there is a crisis in the Middle East today. I would like to express the hope that despite everything everyone will act sensibly and that war, which no one wants, will not break out....We do not want war with any Arab country. We want peace with all our neighbors. We will do everything we can so that peace may be established and war prevented...