

Statement by Prime Minister Eshkol - 27 June 1967

At the end of June 1967, the Government of Israel felt that a statement regarding the future of the Middle East and its own views on the region would serve a good purpose. The Prime Minister, speaking to foreign correspondents in Jerusalem, read the following outline of the Government's position:

My country has just passed through a fateful struggle for its very existence. At this occasion, I should like to make a statement:

So long as our neighbors will persist in their policy of belligerence and will make plans for our destruction, we will not relinquish the areas that are now under our control and that we deem necessary for our security and self-defence. If, on the other hand, the Arab States will agree to discuss peace with us and will forego their war against us, there is no problem that, I hope, we will not be able to solve in direct negotiations, for the benefit of all parties concerned.

The prospects of direct negotiations are better today, I would say, than they have been at any time in the last twenty years, because the Arab States should be closer than ever to recognizing the need to face realities in the Middle East. They have tried war three times. The time has come for them to try out peace. During the last two decades it has become abundantly clear that the so-called armistice regime that existed from 1949 to 1967 is not conducive to peace and is not, therefore, in the best interests of the peoples of the region - Israelis or Arabs. Past experience has also shown that third-party mediation can be of little help. If the Arabs are ready for peace, there is no reason why they should not agree to talk with us about it. If they don't want peace, third-party mediation would only serve as a screen behind which the Arab States could pursue their policy of non-recognition of Israel and belligerency toward it. The establishment of peace between Israel and its Arab neighbors will, once and for all, put an end to the use of refugees as pawns in the political game and is bound to create the conditions for the solution of many problems -including, of course, the refugee problem. I am certain that the international community, together with the countries of our region, including Israel, would then succeed in bringing about a just and truly humane settlement of the refugee question. That Jews and Arabs are capable of living together in harmony and cooperation was amply demonstrated in the recent crisis when Israel's Arab inhabitants stood by Israel, as loyal citizens, both before and during the severe military test through which we passed. Many of them volunteered their services in various capacities and played their part in the national effort. Also, a number of Druze units actively and courageously participated

in the fighting.

The same will for neighborly relations was the mainspring of the exemplary attitude of our officers and soldiers towards the prisoners-of-war who fell into their hands. Not only were all the regulations of the Geneva Convention fully observed, but there are many instances in which our men went out of their way to lighten the lot of these prisoners - their former enemies. On the occasion of my visit to our wounded at Hadassah Hospital in Jerusalem, I saw also wounded soldiers from the ranks of the Arab armies who had fallen into our hands. These wounded of the enemy armies received the same excellent medical treatment that is accorded our own wounded soldiers.

I am happy to note that life in the area captured by the Israel Defence Forces is returning to normal. Many regular peace-time services and facilities, interrupted by the war, are functioning once again, and steps are being taken to restore the remaining services, as well, to normal order. Most of the inhabitants in these areas are cooperating in this effort, and we all hope that the wounds of the past will quickly be healed.

Every effort was made, in the course of the fighting, to protect and preserve the places sacred to the various faiths -at times even at the cost of military expedience. Whoever visits the areas captured by our forces can see for himself that nearly all of the places of worship have remained untouched. We have made arrangements to assure free access to the Holy places to all who wish to worship there - members of all faiths, in those areas and throughout Israel.

The future of the Middle East now hinges on what the Governments of the region are prepared to do to fashion that future in the best interests of their peoples.

There are today indications that at least part of the Arab leadership is aware of the futility of attempting to return to the untenable conditions that prevailed in this region for so many years. They - like us - would prefer to see a "new deal" for the peoples of the Middle East. To what extent they will be prepared to translate this awareness into concrete terms will, in large measure, depend on the willingness of other nations the world over to put the full weight of their influence behind direct negotiations between the parties. Such negotiations are the only hope of achieving a genuine and enduring peace in the Middle East.

Our hand is extended to peace to all who are ready for peace.