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The 1956 Sinai Campaign Viewed From Asia: Selections From Moshe Sharett's Diaries

OCTOBER 29, 2001 MARKED THE FORTY-FIFTH anniversary of the Sinai Campaign—Israel's first “war of choice.”¹ The declared objective of the Israel Defense Force [IDF] was to eliminate the *feda'yun* incursions launched over the preceding two years from bases in the Egyptian-administered Gaza Strip and Sinai Peninsula against mostly civilian targets inside Israel. It soon became clear, however, that the IDF campaign had been prepared in collusion with France and Great Britain, and that Israel's war aims were not limited to this single declared military objective. In addition, both powers had their own reasons to seek the downfall of Gamal Abd al-Nasir's régime, which had revealed a major arms procurement program with the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia in September 1955 and which had further defied the western powers by nationalizing the Suez Canal Company in July 1956.

On 29 October 1956, Moshe Sharett (1894–1965) was in New Delhi, no longer holding any government office. He had served as Israel's first foreign minister (May 1948–June 1956) and its second prime minister (December 1953–November 1955). Before and after the founding of the state, he had worked intimately with David Ben-Gurion, with whom he shared many goals, but with whom he increasingly clashed during the early 1950s. During his concurrent term as prime minister and foreign minister in 1954 and 1955, Sharett—with some difficulty—led a cabinet majority that favored restraint and moderation in the face of *feda'yun* cross-border raids. Although deeply troubled by the growing popularity of the competing “activist” strategy of stiff reprisals advocated by Defense Minister Ben-Gurion, IDF Chief-of-Staff Moshe Dayan and others, Sharett reluctantly

agreed to continue to serve as foreign minister in a new government formed under Ben-Gurion's premiership in November 1955.

In the crisis atmosphere caused by the Egyptian-Czech arms deal, Sharett led Israel's representatives abroad in lobbying western powers (without success) for a treaty guarantee that would have afforded protection to the Jewish state in the event of an Arab attack. Greater hopes were attached to the simultaneous quest for defensive armaments. Foreign Ministry officials, along with emissaries from the Defense Ministry, conducted parallel, but often uncoordinated, efforts at arms purchases in the United States, Britain, France, and Canada.

During 1955 and 1956, Sharett's relations with Ben-Gurion grew extremely tense. Sharett mobilized cabinet votes that blocked Ben-Gurion's proposals that the IDF capture the Gaza Strip or the Straits of Tiran (Sharm el-Sheikh), and that Israel renounce its adherence to the 1949 General Armistice Agreement in protest against Egyptian violations. While in the United States awaiting the State Department's decision on Israel's arms requests, Sharett felt he was "stabbed in the back" upon receiving news of a massive IDF attack on 11/12 December 1955 against Syrian positions near the Sea of Galilee (Lake Kinneret). During his absence, Sharett confided sarcastically to his diary, "Defense Minister B.G. [had] consulted [acting] Foreign Minister B.G. and [had] received the approval of Prime Minister B.G." for this significant escalation in Israel's border wars. The disproportionately high toll of Syrian casualties shocked international opinion, leading officials in both Washington and London to hold off any decisions regarding Israel's arms requests until after the UN Security Council had completed its hearings on the Syrian complaint.²

Relations with Ben-Gurion deteriorated further throughout the winter and spring of 1956, with the result that Sharett was finally forced to announce his resignation as Israel's foreign minister on 18 June 1956. Having created the Ministry of Foreign Affairs with hand-picked officials from the pre-state Jewish Agency Political Department, Sharett felt further humiliated by the fact that "his" ministry was being taken over by Golda Myerson (whose family name was shortly to be hebraicized to "Meir.") His diary makes amply clear that Sharett regarded Golda as his intellectual inferior, a person with no experience in foreign affairs, whose chief qualification for the job appeared to be her total subservience to Prime Minister Ben-Gurion.

While considering his career options following his unexpected retirement, Sharett accepted a proposal to represent the Mapai Party and the Government of Israel at several upcoming international conferences sched-

uled to be held in various Asian capitals. At the same time, the Foreign Ministry hoped Sharett's trip would help to solidify and expand Israel's relations with the newly-independent countries of Asia. On 19 September 1956, Sharett left Lod Airport on an 81-day itinerary covering eleven Asian countries: Burma, the Philippines, Japan, Singapore, Malaya, Ceylon, Nepal, India, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia. A prolific diarist and letter-writer throughout his political life, Sharett also kept a diary during his mission to Asia.³ The diary reveals how Sharett, along with the entire Israeli foreign service, was caught completely unaware by the IDF's surprise invasion of Sinai on 29 October 1956.⁴ Like many Israelis abroad, he had been following reports of the frequent incursions and reprisals along the Israel-Jordan frontier, but he was not among Ben-Gurion's small circle of confidants who were privy to the secret plans that were made with France and Britain for a coordinated attack on Egypt.

To his horror, Sharett's much-anticipated interview with India's influential Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, fell on the day after Israeli troops invaded Sinai. During this and subsequent meetings, Sharett found himself forced (with imperfect briefing from Jerusalem) to argue Israel's case with Asian leaders in an increasingly hostile climate. He continued to analyze the daily reports from home critically and insightfully, wrestling with his conscience and recording his frustration at his inability to express or act upon his privately-held misgivings about the wisdom of the Sinai Campaign.

Sharett returned to Israel on 9 December 1956, more bitter and withdrawn than ever. He made few public appearances, apart from his reports on his Asian trip to the cabinet, the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, and the Mapai Central Committee.⁵ As with much of Sharett's diary, the selected extracts reproduced below testify to the personal anguish and sensitivities of a dedicated and sophisticated political figure who operated at a distinct disadvantage in the shadow of David Ben-Gurion—a more successful leader who embodied, for vulnerable Israelis, the promise (however chimerical) of a solution through dramatic military action to the wider and deeper problems of relations with the Arabs. In Sharett's 1956 critique from the sidelines, today's readers will experience a chilling sensation of *déjà vu* with regard to the dilemmas that continue to face Israelis in their difficult and still unsuccessful efforts to win the acceptance of a resentful and hostile Arab world.

The extracts below are taken from the abridged English edition of Sharett's 8-volume *Yoman Ishi* [Personal Diary, 1953–1957] being prepared by Neil Caplan and Yaakov Sharett. The translation is by Anthony Berris and Yaakov Sharett.

*

Wednesday, September 19

[- - -] We took off [from Lod] at 11:15 and landed in Rome at 2:45 P.M. where I was received by the embassy staff. I was handed a cable from Avi [Avshalom] Caspi [Israel's Consul] in Bombay informing me that Nehru had arranged to receive me on the 29th or 30th of October before the Bombay Conference, just as I had wished. Another obstacle had been removed. [- - -]

Singapore, Thursday, October 11

The Reuters correspondent called Eliashiv [Ben-Horin, a Foreign Ministry official who accompanied Sharett on his Asian trip] to tell him that the IDF had attacked the Jordanian village of Qalqilya in great force, including artillery. [- - -] It was unclear whether the idea had been to destroy the village or take it, or possibly to provoke the other side into a serious response which would ignite a new conflagration. I also wondered whether this had been a reprisal for the killing of the five people on the road to Sdom.⁶ But why Qalqilya? [- - -] I recalled that once, when discussing a reprisal, B.G. had said that if we wanted, we could take Qalqilya. So B.G. and Moshe Dayan had shaken off their bridles, but to what end? To provoke Jordan and Egypt into war? I had no doubt at all that Moshe was hell-bent on forcing the issue by means of a large-scale military operation, but I still found it difficult to accept that he had been able to make B.G. change his mind.⁷ [- - -]

Singapore, Thursday, October 18

[- - -] During the day I received a detailed cable from Israel on [Ben-Gurion's October 15 Knesset] speech which contained several "problematic" passages: a declaration to the effect that if we were attacked we would not simply defend ourselves, but go on the offensive—as though someone were about to attack us in the next couple of days.⁸ [- - -]

Bombay / Calcutta, Sunday, October 21

We left for India this morning, and after two stopovers arrived at Bombay, where our Consulate is located. A flood of mail from home awaited me there. [- - -] After a break of a few hours, we continued on our way to Calcutta. Spent the time reading the papers from home, which contained a body-blow: eighteen of our men, including five officers, and not nine as previously reported, had fallen in the Qalqilya battle. [- - -] The general impression given by the press was alarming. [- - -] The sheer size of the opera-

tion, which was probably unequaled even in the War of Independence, and the heroism and military capability that were displayed in it, together with the eternal glory that was the lot of the fallen, seemed to have paralyzed all political considerations and turned the event into one of national arousal that stood in total contrast to clear and sober thinking. [- - -]

Delhi, Sunday, October 28

We landed in Delhi at 3:30 P.M. [- - -] Avi Caspi had come [from Bombay] to Delhi specially, and [- - -] had brought me a veritable mountain of mail. [- - -] One of Zipporah's [Sharett's wife] letters described the funeral of her cousin, Ido, who had fallen in the Qalqilya operation, at [Kibbutz] Afikim. She wrote, "What good will come of the deaths of 18 men, almost all of them officers in the flower of their youth? So we have destroyed all the police stations. What next? Will the bloodshed ever stop?" [- - - Foreign Minister] Golda [Meir], Zipporah went on, was extremely warlike at the moment and it was clear that in this hawkishness [- - -] she had become totally detached from current Israeli reality, and that B.G.'s treatment of her was pushing her towards Moshe Dayan. [- - -] People were now saying that B.G. had become a "Sharettist," that Golda had become the more belligerent of the two, and that one of the results had been that the Foreign Minister was not participating in political debates in the Knesset. [- - -]

Delhi, Monday, October 29

The papers carried a report in bold type of a partial mobilization of our reserve forces back home, which had followed an extraordinary evening Cabinet meeting at which B.G. had spoken about the current situation. The report was linked with another, which told of the unification of the Syrian, Jordanian and Egyptian military commands under the command of an Egyptian general. I was consumed with the fear that always accompanies lack of knowledge, and the uncertainty about what would come next. Was this simply a precaution? Had there been any sign that we might be attacked by any of our neighbors? Or was this the initial stage of an offensive? I had not heard a thing from home and was angry and frustrated. How could I appear before Nehru tomorrow when I knew absolutely nothing of our intentions? [- - -]

Delhi, Tuesday, October 30

I awoke from the oblivion of sleep and was immediately plunged into a sea of anxiety when I remembered what the day held for me. But my musings on the riddle of the partial mobilization of our forces were rudely interrupted



Moshe Sharett on his way to meet with Indian Prime Minister Nehru in New Delhi on 30 October 1956, the day after Israel launched Operation *Kadesh*.
Courtesy of the Moshe Sharett Heritage Society

by a call from the United Press representative who asked for my comments on the latest news. I had not yet seen the papers, so I asked him what it was about. He told me that the IDF had invaded the Sinai peninsula in force and that one of its columns was approaching the Suez Canal. [- - -] It is difficult to describe the storm of feelings that besieged me. We were at war! We were in an initiated war! We were the aggressors! I got hold of a paper and read the statement which had been issued by the IDF spokesman. I noted the explanations it contained to the effect that the operation was the direct result of repeated Egyptian attacks on land and at sea. [- - -] One thing was clear: I would have to defend our actions here. [- - -]

In the meantime, I was left with no time to plan my talk with Nehru and barely managed to scribble a few headings. [- - -] I pulled myself together and went to fight my “duel.” [- - -] I had been invited to the Foreign Ministry, which was situated in one of the wings of the main government complex in central New Delhi, adjacent to the impressive parliament building. [- - -] Even before I entered [Nehru’s] office I had decided to

open my remarks with a mention of the morning's events in order to take the initiative and avoid having to appear as though I were trying to evade the issue. I said that the morning had been blighted by serious events on the Egypt-Israel border. I was not in possession of any hard facts from my government on what had occurred, but I was aware of the recent serious damage done to our security by the Egyptians and that I felt sure that if the government had felt the need to take vigorous action, it had done so in response to some extremely serious provocation. I added that these events had no effect on the root of the problem—on the contrary, they only served to underline it. The problem was the absence of peace between us and our neighbors because of their stubborn refusal to make peace. For our part, we were prepared to accept an armistice if only to be allowed to go about our business in peace, but experience had shown that armistices had been the subject of constant violations by the other side.

Nehru's head, which always appeared to be slightly bowed, bowed even lower, his face tightened, and he said, "Indeed, when I read the news in the morning papers I became extremely depressed. What will be the outcome of this operation? The recent impression has been that Israel has been more guilty of belligerency than the Arabs. This was borne out by U.N. reports and not only by what the Arab states say."

I replied that I fully understood the reasons for this impression, but that it was both erroneous and unjustified. When one read of an Arab military action in the papers one day, and an Israeli action the next, the picture became blurred. It was an incontrovertible fact that each new wave of hostilities had been initiated by the Arabs. Our actions were reprisals and never initiated actions. We also did not retaliate in every instance. Only after a number of attacks, which might constitute a serious threat to our security if they were allowed to continue unchecked, did we take action. The impression was also distorted because the attacks against us, which were mainly undertaken by small gangs acting deep inside our territory, did either not gain much prominence in the press or were not reported at all, while our own reprisals made headlines. We maintained no gangs and did not hide behind the misnomer of "irregular forces" and so our responses were always purely military and very impressive. But those same "trivial" attacks on our territory were an evil which we were unable to accept. They disrupted any effort at normal life and work, not only in the border areas per se, for our entire country had become a border area. Anyone accustomed to the sheer size of India would find it difficult to grasp Israel's situation which was that of a small, narrow country, surrounded by enemies who hit at her with the objective of turning her life into a living hell. [- - -]

Nehru [- -] was fully aware of the Arab position and their style of rhetoric. They would never recognize Israel, they would fight Israel in five, ten, twenty, thirty and fifty years time and they would never compromise. What had been the fate of the Crusader kingdom that had existed for such and such a time? His speech was the epitome of erudition. But he wanted me to tell him what the solution might be, for he himself confessed that he could see none. One could possibly think that, given time, the Arabs might adapt themselves to the facts, but those hopes had been dashed. He felt that the situation was worsening.

I said that there could only be one solution: a peace agreement reached through direct negotiation. Sooner or later, that would be the only solution to the conflict. But the process could be speeded up by mobilizing world opinion to its cause, and the consolidation of Asian opinion was of particular importance, as was the adoption of a clear position and the voicing of specific demands from the Asian governments to this end. U.S. and European influence should not be under-estimated, but the Asian powers, especially India, stood a greater chance of bringing their own influence to bear. The Western Powers had always been suspect of ulterior motives in the Middle East conflict. [- -] The same was true of the U.S.S.R. This was not the case with India, which no Arab state could ever accuse of double-dealing. Hence, the major role to be played by India regarding the Arab states and the special responsibility which devolved upon her regarding peace in the Middle East.

Nehru replied that he had already spoken to the Arabs in this vein, both privately and in public. His present question was: what was to happen in the meantime? What was going to happen in the next few days? [- -]

I said that we had no alternative but to hold our own. It was of the greatest importance to hasten the coming of peace by mobilizing world opinion to that end, first and foremost in Asia, and by exerting moral pressure, amicable wherever possible, on Egypt and the other Arab states. But if that were truly out of the question, then the present situation, with all its concomitant dangers, would continue. We were facing an ever-increasing threat. Egypt was led by a man suffering from delusions of grandeur. He was planning to cast his net over the neighboring countries of northeast Africa and western Asia. He had made some impressive gains indeed but these had gone to his head and had ignited his lust for conquest. He had now surrounded Israel and fully intended to destroy her. [- -]

His impression of [Egyptian President, Gamal Abd al-]Nasir, he said, even after hearing what I had to say, was of a relatively moderate man. He was, he continued, capable of making fiery speeches, but he felt that Nasir

was not a man controlled by lust and evil drives. I replied that Nasir was apparently extremely selective in what he said at home or abroad. [- - -]

I then said that I could not avoid raising a practical issue. He grasped my intention immediately and said, "The question of [diplomatic] relations between us?"

"Of course," I replied, "can there be any possible justification for this situation wherein you do not speak to us as friends?"

He gestured towards me with his hand as if to say, "Are we not talking?"

I said that these were not the kind of relations that were accepted in today's world. No permanent channels existed between us for exchanges of views and information. [- - -] If Nasir was indeed a moderate, then he should be interested in reaching agreement with us. How would he do so? Someone would have to help, and it was here that India could play a vital role. It was obvious that Nasir would be far more interested in the good offices of India rather than those of the U.S. or Great Britain. But how could India play that role if there were no links between her and Israel? If his assessment of Nasir was indeed accurate, then he himself should be interested in having an Indian presence in Jerusalem. [- - -]

I asked him how he could possibly justify the existing situation in which they did not maintain strict neutrality in the conflict between us and the Arabs. India supported them against us. You tell us that you will establish diplomatic relations with us only when peace is achieved, while you maintain relations with the Arabs unconditionally and at a time when we want peace and the Arabs reject it. This stand only serves to delay peace and encourages Arab rejectionism. It was clear that he was in dire straits. He tried to fob me off with a smile and [some untenable excuses.] [- - -] I left after having been with him for an hour and a quarter. I left his office more tense than I had been earlier, but I was unbowed. [- - -]

We went back to the hotel for lunch. While we were still eating we were handed an *en-clair* cable [from Jerusalem] which contained the statement issued by the Foreign Ministry spokesman on the background of the operation and its objectives. I was very disappointed that it had not arrived three hours earlier, for then, instead of firing at random, I would have been able to face Nehru with some solid facts. [- - -] I had to prepare my lecture which I was to deliver before the World Affairs Council in the afternoon. I worked on the lecture for three hours. [- - -]

The lecture took exactly 45 minutes, five minutes less than the time I had been allotted. The audience had sat riveted and was silent throughout. Restraint ruled here, and no one would permit himself to heckle or interject.

But the atmosphere was electric and the sparks began to fly when the question-and-answer session got underway. [- - -] The questions were almost all polemical and the majority were openly hostile. [- - -] The crossfire of questions and answers continued for about an hour, twice as long as was usual at the Council. At the end, I was surrounded by the Jewish contingent who were very emotional.

Late in the evening we heard that France and Britain had presented an ultimatum to Egypt and Israel: either withdraw to a distance of 10 miles from the Canal within 12 hours or they would use force to take the area over temporarily. Stunning news! There were two possibilities: there had either been prior collusion with us, just Britain or France too, or both powers had exploited the present situation to further their long-standing plot through an invasion of Sinai. We, in any event, had helped to ignite the conflagration. [- - -]

I said to David [Hacohen, Sharett's close friend and Israel's Minister in Rangoon, 1953–55], with whom I had thrashed out all the possibilities, that B.G. was playing "*va banque*" and putting everything at risk. His objective was obviously to topple Nasir and his motives were not entirely free of his personal hatred of the Egyptian leader and competition with him for the title of the greatest statesman and strongman of the Middle East. He would show him his strength and let the whole world know who was the real hero. I thought to myself that this entire situation had been set in motion by a seventy-year-old man who could not wait to accomplish a prodigious feat while he was still in possession of all his faculties. [- - -]

Delhi, Wednesday, October 31

[Local] newspaper headlines screamed "War!" The editorials all condemned Israel, most of them with extreme vituperation. It was clear to all that a new conflagration was raging and that we had ignited it. [- - -] Had we considered all the possible consequences? And what was the objective? To hold on to Sinai? To reach the Canal? [- - -] Would the war end here? And above all, had there been prior consultation between us and the French and British? Had we acted unilaterally or in collusion with them?

The radio gave us further news during the morning: the U.S. proposal to condemn Israel in the Security Council had been blocked by an Anglo-French veto. This was the first time in U.N. history that Western unity had been breached. The Egyptians had rejected the Anglo-French ultimatum. Israel had undertaken to halt its forces 10 miles from the Canal. British and French forces had entered the area and their aircraft were bombing Egyptian airfields. The IDF was fast over-running the Sinai peninsula. [- - -]

I later held a press conference without having received any further information or guidelines from home. The conference was well-attended by representatives of all the leading Indian papers, the Indian news agencies, Reuters, A.P., U.P., A.F.P., the London *Times*, the *New York Times*, and many more. [- - -] I stated that, as I was not an Israeli government spokesman, any opinions expressed would be my own, if the ladies and gentlemen of the press were interested in hearing them. I was immediately asked whether the report that Britain and France had encouraged Israel to undertake the Sinai campaign was correct. I replied that I was “totally convinced that the Government of Israel, and it alone, was responsible for its actions.” I described the campaign itself as an unavoidable response to the renewed *feda'yun* attacks and added that another good reason was the tacit threat in the establishment of the joint [Arab] military command. Regarding British and French intervention, I had always held that “the unlocked door always beckons to the thief”—in other words, the absence of peace between Egypt and Israel, or between Israel and all the Arab states, had always acted as an inducement for foreign intervention in Middle East affairs, and this assessment of the situation had been vindicated this time. [- - -]

I had heard last night about Indian music concerts which were given every evening, and I decided to attend this evening’s performance in order to learn something of this branch of the world of music and to relax a little from the tension I was under. I soon tired of listening and sank into my own thoughts. How had we undertaken this adventure without giving due consideration to the consequences? [- - -] Once the euphoria of the military victory, which by all accounts had been stunning, had abated, sobriety would follow. We would then begin to pay the price but, again, I was neither protesting nor appealing. The government had made its decision, it bore the responsibility, and it knew what lay ahead. I was on the outside, and I regretted having accepted a diplomatic mission which has been rendered worthless.

Delhi / Bombay, Thursday, November 1

On the flight to Bombay I read the Delhi newspapers, *Statesman*, *Times of India* and the *Hindustan Times*, and found that they had not only all given my press conference extensive coverage but had reported my words fairly, albeit not always with full understanding of the finer points.

The Indian press was in an uproar. [- - -] Nehru had issued a statement calling our actions “aggression” against Egyptian territory, saying that the ultimatum delivered by the two powers was totally without authority, warn-

ing that the crisis would have dire consequences in Asia and Africa and that the war could spread. He called upon the U.N. to take action, and stated that India had approached all the governments involved. How had they approached Israel? That, after all, had been the whole point of my question to Nehru, to which he had provided no satisfactory answer. [- - -]

The *Times of India* carried a report from London which revealed some secrets from Paris and London—indications that could show that there had been collusion between Israel, France and Britain. [- - -] The paper's editorial condemned the two powers for their "treachery and deceit" the likes of which had not been seen since the time of Hitler. [- - -] It had now become clear that the Israeli aggression had been the prelude to further aggression at the hands of France and Britain, the objective of which was to reclaim control of the Suez Canal. The editorial tore Eden's arguments and excuses to bits and presented the aggression in all its nakedness. Even if Eden's claims were just, the writer asked, "what right had Britain and France to be the watchdogs of Western Asia, despite the efforts of the U.N.?" The U.S. and the U.S.S.R. deserved full praise while Britain and France were to be roundly condemned. [- - -]

There was a briefing cable from the Foreign Ministry awaiting me at the Caspis's home, a cable which I had hoped would arrive in time for my Delhi press conference. The contents more or less fell into line with what I had said and requested me to stress that the objective of our action was to stamp out the gangs' nests, and that it had absolutely no connection with the conflict about the Suez Canal between France and Britain and Egypt, or with any other objective within a wider context.

We heard in the evening that we had taken Rafah and our forces were moving on El-Arish. Was Herzl's dream about to come true? Anything was possible. The taking of Rafah meant that the entire Gaza Strip had been encircled. What would become of it now? Would we take it and put our necks under the yoke of the refugees, or would we hang fire and let the U.N. take care of it? [- - -]

Bombay, Friday, November 2

[- - -] I held a press conference at Avi's home at 4:00 P.M. The living room was filled to capacity, with Indians accounting for the majority of those present, but there were a few Europeans too. I opened with a review of current events and once again stressed the fact that I was not an official representative of the Government of Israel. I added a second statement to the one I had used earlier to the effect that "We, and we alone, are responsible for the actions taken. And we are responsible only for those actions we

have taken.” [- - -] My review contained a sharp condemnation of Nasir. I placed the blame for the crisis, which had hit both Israel and Egypt, firmly on his shoulders and members of his regime. I sensed how my words cut several of my listeners to the quick, but I repeated them again and again so that they would be fully absorbed. I was asked to comment on Nehru’s statement and I said that it had hurt me deeply, because he had taken recent events out of their proper context and had thus made them completely incomprehensible and, as a result of incomplete and inaccurate reports, he had erred in his assessment of them. [- - -]

Bombay, Saturday, November 3

[- - -] Alone in the car on the way to a meeting of the Socialist Conference secretariat, I could not stop thinking. My brain was boiling like a kettle, the lid of which was dancing on the escaping steam. How, I thought! It was clear that momentous and historic events had taken place which had created an entirely new situation. [- - -] Had I been in Israel and in the Cabinet, I would obviously have opposed our present move and become the focus of opposition to it—unless, of course, we had been forced to act for reasons that were presently unknown to me. [- - -] Who was to know if these plans had not been germinating for a long time, and whether or not they had been part and parcel and the root cause of my dismissal at the time that it had occurred?⁹

The IDF had definitely achieved a brilliant victory. Nasir’s army in Sinai had been destroyed, we had taken thousands of prisoners and tremendous amounts of military booty, and Arab military unity had been shown in its true colors in the most humiliating way. Nasir’s dream of becoming leader of the Arab world had been shattered and, in the wake of the Sinai Campaign, the Middle East would never be the same again. After seeing the heroism of the IDF, its brilliant victory and the vengeance that had been wreaked on the hated Egyptians, the spirits of the people of Israel had probably never been higher. [- - -]

This was the general picture that we received [in all the reports from Israel]. But, on the other hand, in the eyes of the world we had colluded with France and Britain and, together with them, we were now totally isolated. All of the Asian countries were clearly against us and one of the possibly less important consequences of the campaign was that all of my efforts in this region had been in vain. [- - -]

And the dream had finally become reality: Gaza was ours. [- - - But if we annexed Gaza] the number of Arabs in Israel would be more than doubled. How could we withstand the pressure of the refugees who would

want to return to their lands in the border areas of the Gaza Strip? Whom could we force to accept them? Would we resettle them? And what would happen if they began an insurrection, which had occurred several times in the past under the Egyptians? What would the situation be now if we had indeed rendered Nasir helpless, but the flames between us and the Arabs were higher than they had been before—now that we had lost American aid for the time being; now that our economic crisis had deepened immeasurably and we had been plunged into a political and economic tangle from which we would be unable to extricate ourselves? Would we have only the loyalty of the Jewish people on our side? And how could we know, when the final consequences of our actions became clear, that the loyalty of the Jewish people to our country had not been seriously undermined? [- - -]

Bombay, Monday, November 5

David [Hacohen] began to plead with me to send a cable to B.G. congratulating him on the IDF's victory. It was extremely difficult for me to free myself from my mental reservations, but in the end I had to agree that David was right and I drafted the following cable which I signed "The Mapai Delegation": *"During these fateful days our hearts are with the IDF soldiers and their commanders in the awesome desert. We are proud of their heroism, fearful for their safety, and moved by their splendid superiority and bravery. It is our prayer that the long-awaited peace will follow this brilliant victory."* [- - -]

Bombay, Tuesday, November 6

[- - - The U.S.S.R.] has now issued an ultimatum to Britain and France: if they do not desist immediately, they will have to face the U.S.S.R. There was also a stern statement by [Soviet Prime Minister, Nikolai A.] Bulganin addressed to Israel.¹⁰ [- - -] Our course of action—a crushing military initiative, devoid of any political considerations, a theory of a nation living by its sword in a world based on mutual dependence, a policy of King David in a world of atomic chain reaction—this was nothing less than gambling with the future of Israel. [- - -] Were we aware of what kind of genie we were about to release from the bottle? Had we embarked upon our actions with our eyes open and fully-considered decisions, or had we not considered the outcome at all and relied solely on our strength? If there really had been some collusion in our reliance on the two "weak sisters" [i.e., France and the U.K.], then this proved frightening short-sightedness in our international thinking. [- - -] The IDF's tremendous victory has doubtless added strength to the blind national arrogance and has inflated the people's already exaggerated self-confidence. [- - -]

It could of course be said that from the start, and in retrospect too, we should not care about the peace of the world if there is no peace for Israel, and therefore Israel was entitled to jar global institutions with her war for peace and security, since in any event she has nothing to lose. But how can Israel have peace if all around her everything is collapsing and, in addition, she is being accused of playing the role of arch-criminal?

Another cable contained [Foreign Ministry Director-General] Walter [Eytan]'s press conference statement, warning Egypt not to forego this unique opportunity to make peace! What was the meaning of this “warning”—what would we do to Egypt if she misses the opportunity? And how did we know that she was eager to seize this opportunity, or that she was at all interested in peace? This was a very poor Israeli version of malignant wishful thinking. [- - -] It seems that our people in Jerusalem have been overtaken by a mania of mystical belief that peace is indeed just around the corner, simply because we have dealt Nasir a crushing blow. [- - -]

In the middle of dinner, the mail from the embassy was brought in, and in it was a letter from Zipporah. Impatiently, I tore open the envelope and pored over the letter. The letter was dated October 30th, exactly one week ago, the day after the Sinai Campaign began. There was a description of the evening the campaign got under way, how it happened suddenly and astonishingly. [- - -] So, we had colluded! [- - -] I did not say a thing to anyone, but inwardly I was in a renewed turmoil, my first reaction being: I have lied to myself! I had been a false witness to J.P. [Narayan], Ashok [Mehta] and Perim Bassin [members of the Indian Socialist Party], Chu Nyen [Burmese socialist leader] and Shaharir [Indonesian delegate], the entire [International Socialist] Conference, the entire press—those many people here and all over the world that perhaps still believed that Moshe Sharett was a man who spoke the truth, and if he had expressed matters so definitively, one must listen and believe him. However, the main issue was that we have taken this course of action which has led us to a historic disgrace—certainly in the eyes of all the Asian nations. One cannot hide the truth from history; the facts will eventually be discovered and then we will find that we ourselves will have provided the proof—by the very attempt to hide the secret and publicly deny it—that it is dishonorable. [- - -]

Bombay, Wednesday, November 7

Britain and France were withdrawing. [- - -] Eden had announced that the objective of the campaign, the disengagement of Israeli and Egyptian forces (in Port Said!) had been achieved “in the main” and, as this was the case, they were now waiting for the establishment of an international force. [- - -]

During the meeting [of the drafting committee of the Socialist Conference], the Burmese minister Takin Chit Mung, perhaps the best of all our friends in Rangoon (he had visited Israel twice), came in. He carried the afternoon paper, handed it to me and pointed to a section. I read it. The headline read “We will not relinquish any territory we have conquered, says B.G.” The full text read, “Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion said in a broadcast yesterday that the Tiran and Sanapir Islands are now Israeli territory. Mr. Ben-Gurion said that both islands had been Israeli territory throughout the history of the Jewish people.” [- - -] One could sense a severe undermining of our credibility.

Again, what I had feared most happened—and with a vengeance! With B.G., *l'appetit vient en mangeant* [the appetite comes while eating]. [- - -] Initially, we had said that we had undertaken this campaign and conquered what we had conquered in order to wipe out the nests of murderers, eradicate their bases. And now, we had not only invaded Sinai but also ancient history. We had postulated a new doctrine which proved that this territory had always been ours. If these islands had been in Israelite hands since ancient times, then had Mount Sinai itself played less of a historic role? There was no doubt that its place in the history of Israel was greater and mightier than that of those two insignificant islands! But if Mount Sinai was ours, then what about the great River Euphrates? So it appeared that the Arab propagandists were right. All those inciters, upon whom we had poured our rage because of their slanders and lies when they had declared that we meant conquest, that our passion to dominate was immeasurable and that we were therefore an unquestionable danger to the surrounding Arab countries!

I was enraged, but controlled my anger and said to myself, let the man do as he pleases! [- - -] That night we heard the summary of B.G.'s [November 7] speech in the Knesset on the radio [- - -]. According to what we heard, he had announced that we would not return one inch of Sinai. He also maintained that we would not allow one foreign soldier (i.e., the international force) to set foot on our territory—either sovereign or occupied. At the same time, he mentioned that the area of the Sinai Peninsula was 60,000 square kilometers, four times the size of the State of Israel. The impression made by this broadcast was that he was intoxicated by the victory. The very expression “magnificent combat” [here Sharett uses the English phrase] which appeared in the press displays extreme arrogance. We were disobeying the U.N. on two counts—we would not withdraw, and we were opposing the establishment of the international force. It was clear that the focus of the struggle would now be shifted, from being guilty of invasion to attacking the authority of the U.N.¹¹

Bombay, Thursday, November 8

[- - -] At 1:00 A.M. *Kol-Israel* announced that the Prime Minister would broadcast again tonight. Eisenhower had sent Ben-Gurion an urgent note demanding the withdrawal of IDF troops to the previous borders. A reply had been sent to Bulganin but its contents had not been disclosed.¹²

Bombay, Friday, November 9

There was a news item on the radio about our government's decision of last night: we were prepared to withdraw the IDF from Sinai as soon as an international force would be established. A weight off my mind! A weight? The Rock of Gibraltar! This was a decision that changed the entire situation, and in particular our status here—a complete turnaround. [- - -] The question has to be asked: why had it been necessary to adopt such a firm position, stating and restating it with such vehemence, and then withdraw, shamefacedly as it were, as a result of pressure? [- - -] It turns out that the announcement was delivered to the Israeli public by B.G. himself in a broadcast that took place after midnight.¹³ [- - -]

Bombay, Sunday, November 11

[- - -] A long-awaited letter was brought [to the hotel in Delhi]—Walter [Eytan]'s personal letter, which should have reached me before the Bombay Conference and which was to have revealed the mystery of the origins of the Sinai Campaign—13 pages, written as usual in green ink and in curlicued, assertive handwriting. I pounced on it and clutched it as a parched man would clutch the edge of an oasis. Reading it confirmed what I had already guessed [about the collusion with France and Britain]. [- - -]

Now the line had been adopted, it had been authorized formally and I had already committed myself personally, together with my honor and integrity, and I had no other course to take or the ability to turn back. However, I remained astounded and flabbergasted at the short-sightedness and narrow-mindedness of the leaders of our state. If they had foreseen the results and complications in full, or at least most of them, and had decided as they had decided, I would have held my peace. But it was so obvious to me [- - -] that there had been no foresight employed in these matters and that the source of this lack of foresight was in a deep-rooted defect and total lack of understanding of our international relations. [- - -]

Bombay, Tuesday, November 13

[- - -] The fact that Israel's activities in Sinai were justified in the name of self-defense and preservation has to be explained to the Asian nations. However, even if this were to be explained and proved to them from Israel's

standpoint, the critical negative character of this action, particularly regarding the context in which it was taken [together with Britain and France], would continue to exist for them in accordance with their self-perception against the background of current international realities.

One of the reasons for this lies in their attitude towards foreign rule, which is deeply etched in the awareness of this present generation of African and Asian nations. From the historic sequence of events, this attitude, in its essence, had nothing to do with us, either as Jews or as Israelis. [- - -] The character of foreign rule in Asia and Africa was a totally different matter [from the 30-year British Mandate over Palestine, 1918–48]. They were conquered against their will and subjugated to foreign rule, which had taken power by force and as a result of its material advantages, and not based on any moral foundations. [- - -] The conquest and rule in themselves caused these nations to be conceived of as inferior and of lesser value, not worthy of equality or freedom or a position of human and national dignity. The relationship established between the regime and its subjects provided the foreign rulers with the position of a superior race and reminded the natives on every occasion that they were inferior and underprivileged. This was the source of the bitter feeling of insult that became the lot of masses of people and which increased as their suffering continued. [- - -] This sense of insult and degradation, dishonor and abuse of culture and way of life [- - -] was still smoldering in their hearts and souls. The day will come when it will become an historic memory [but] today it is a matter of personal experience for the present generation. [- - -] Even if the sting of the insult has been soothed by the achievement of independence, the resultant hate, suspicion and fear are still very much alive—and so are the excessive sensitivity, at times pathological, to every attempt to return to a regime of abuse of the weak and backward by the strong and developed, and the readiness to react with extreme severity to every hurt of this kind.¹⁴ [- - -]

I thought about our moral status in the future, especially towards Asia. If we adhere to our present position, about which I have sworn to lie, then we are pledged to support an historic falsehood. [- - -]

Bombay, Wednesday, November 14

[- - -] Today I received the November 8th, 9th and 11th editions of *Ha-Aretz*. A veritable treasure trove! [- - -] I learned a great deal from these papers, from the articles they contained. They revealed both the degree to which wishful thinking had taken over our political thinking and proof of the belief that we cannot achieve peace by coercion. [- - -] The issue of November 9th carried banner headlines the width of the front page: “Ben-Gurion:

We will withdraw our forces from Egypt as soon as arrangements are made for the entrance of U.N. forces to the Suez Canal area.”¹⁵ [- - - The issue of November 11 reported] a compelling speech by Golda [Meir] at Bet Ha-Am in Tel-Aviv, at the end of which she specified the objectives of the Sinai Campaign. It seems that official Foreign Ministry briefings to its delegations were one thing, and the Foreign Minister’s speeches another. It had been specifically stated in the briefings that the objective of the campaign was only to eradicate the murderers’ nests and destroy the bases of the gangs’ organizers, i.e., the Egyptian Army. In contrast, the Foreign Minister, in a public speech, had disclosed that in addition to this, the objectives had been “to break Nasir, so he would not be able to threaten us, to secure free navigation for Israeli vessels in the Suez Canal and the Gulf of Eilat, and to banish Egyptian forces from that part of our homeland, which was never part of Egypt, the Gaza Strip.” [- - -]

I returned to a thought that had been gnawing at me for days: If diplomatic relations were to be established between us and India, I would be willing, and even enthusiastic, to take the embassy in India upon myself for a year or two and I would try to show what could be done for Israel within such a time-frame, in India in particular and Asia in general. I started to imagine myself and Zipporah in Delhi and the image I created was very conceivable. We would visit Kashmir together, Ceylon as well, and Nepal. I would lecture at the colleges, write articles, conduct talks and pave many and varied paths for influence and inspiration. I would detach myself completely from the intricacies of Israel and would cure myself of all my ills.¹⁶ [- - -]

Bangkok, Friday, November 23

[- - -] Together with a tidal wave of physical fatigue that overtook me, I fell into a depression and felt myself completely abandoned, lost and devastated. When I return to Israel I will not even be able to lecture. The Party would probably entreat me to do so, but I would have no alternative but to refuse. How could I speak without giving my opinion, even in a hint, and how could I do that and stand accused of sabotaging our foreign policy? On the other hand, would I live a lie in Israel too? I mulled over all that had happened again and again, and once again I reached the conclusion that I would not be considered for any new political mission. Perhaps history would justify B.G.’s government—I assume that is what will happen—but I will not abandon myself to the torture and suffering that I underwent last year as a result of “Operation Kinneret,” and now by the conquest of Sinai. Both then and now I was not given any personal notification even

one hour before the operation, evidence that someone might have been thinking about me and the hell I was going through. They had known the date of my meeting with Nehru full well!¹⁷

Bangkok, Monday, November 26

[- - -] While writing my diary and a cable to the Foreign Ministry, I was overwhelmed by harsh and bitter thoughts about my personal options, certainly during the coming months. I would step off the plane at Lod and what would I say to the press? Would I cover up our failure in Asia and again live a lie? [- - -]

Cambodia, Saturday, December 1

Throughout the tour of ancient temples and palaces and through the guide's incessant chatter, I was living in two worlds—the one spread before me, and the other deep inside me. I made an accounting of my own world and thought that it would be best if, on my return home, I were to fade out of the public eye, be by myself and perhaps finally write the book, “My Father,” and in any event, withdraw from political life.

Cambodia, Sunday, December 2

In an article entitled “The Political Balance-sheet of a Military Campaign,” in *Ha-Aretz* (November 16), Poless [pen-name of Shlomo (Walter) Gross, veteran political commentator] expresses some repentant reflections and signals the beginning of the retreat from the initial exhilaration of the military victory that had been achieved under such marvelous political circumstances. He has now discovered that Nasir has not been eliminated, that his refusal to make peace is even stronger than before, that he is able to rearm and threaten us once again, that we had aligned ourselves with international elements that were on the decline, that we had caused all of Asia to rise up against us, that the U.S. is not with us, that the U.S.S.R. is enraged, that the Arab boycott remains unchanged and that we are now demanding that the U.N. force the Arabs to enter peace negotiations, which is exactly what we had demanded earlier [without result]. And he dares to pose the question: what had we gained? The newspaper that had once praised B.G., particularly for the brilliant political preparation of the campaign, now finds fault with him for not having managed the Foreign Ministry correctly in preparing the international ground for the military operation. [- - -]

At the beginning of his article, Poless stated: [- - -] “By dismissing Moshe Sharett, Mr. Ben-Gurion had guaranteed the conditions for the

military operation, and that any political or diplomatic considerations which might have been opposed to these conditions, would not impede the operation.” He said that B.G.’s political objective had not been the conquest of territory, but the achievement of peace, and that this objective remained unattained. He ended by stating that “we have played, but we have not won the game.” [- -]

Poless’s article was perceptive, but his perception was typically limited. [- -] He failed to understand that [- -] Egypt would never make peace, not even under the pressure of military defeat. The problem of peace between us and the Arabs was not simply a matter of submission to force and making compromises with dishonor, but rather a complex psychological process, a fundamental change of heart, a changed atmosphere, a different view of the future. It might well be that we had no alternative but to initiate [military] actions for our security, but we should be aware of the fact that these would not bring us any closer to peace. On the contrary, they would distance us from it even more. And, knowing this in advance, we must consider the advantages and disadvantages of a military operation. But we should not cherish any illusions that peace is achieved by war—our peace will be achieved only by peaceful means. This is neither naiveté nor devoutness nor an exhibition of morality. This is the sober and practical view of matters as they really stand. [- -]

The truth is known to the very few, and what everybody else knows is not the truth. [- -] The entire public (and this was evident from all the papers) shares in the two-fold conviction (expressed by [Natan] Alterman¹⁸): first, that the state had been saved from the danger of annihilation, or at least from the disaster of terrible destruction; and second, that it owes its salvation to the planning, vision and courage of one man. Who could stand up and deny this? Was there any point in denying it? Under no circumstances, for it is a long affair. One cannot contradict it since there is no certainty in [the contrary] assumption. [- -] It’s possible that, from an historical and objective standpoint, the nation was ordered, as it were, to seize upon this course of action and no other. Who is a prophet to know, who but he who is wise and can judge?

But, whatever the truth may be, it is obvious to all that the operation, victory and salvation have involved casualties and losses, and new dangers in all aspects and on all fronts. It’s also clear to me that one of the “casualties” [here Sharett inserts the English term] is me. As a politician I have fallen in this [Suez] campaign, and that loss should be recorded as well.¹⁹

NOTES

1. See, e.g., Benny Morris, “Kadesh: Israel’s First War of Choice,” in Laurie Eisenberg, Neil Caplan, Naomi Sokoloff and Mohammed Abu-Nimer (eds), *Books on Israel*, v6, (Albany, NY, forthcoming).

2. Moshe Sharett, *Yoman Ishi*, 8 vols., edited by Yaakov Sharett (Tel-Aviv, 1978) v5: 1310, entry for 16 December 1955 [Hebrew]. See, generally, *ibid.*, 1294–320. For details of the Kinneret operation and its political fall-out, see: Mordechai Bar-On, *The Gates of Gaza: Israel’s Road to Suez and Back, 1955–1957*, transl. Ruth Rossing (New York, 1994), ch.5; Mordechai Bar-On, “Olive Leaves: The Excursion on the Shores of Lake Kinneret, 12 December 1955,” *Iyyunim be-Tkumat Israel*, 9 (1999) 87–127; Benny Morris, *Israel’s Border Wars, 1949–1956: Arab Infiltration, Israeli Retaliation, and the Countdown to the Suez War* (New York, 1993) 364–9.

3. Sharett published a cautious, self-censored version of the diary as *Mishut be-Asia* (Tel-Aviv, 1957, 356 pp.) [Hebrew]. The remaining entries, containing much outspoken criticism of the Sinai Campaign and its chief architects, were incorporated 20 years later by his son, Yaakov Sharett, into *Yoman Ishi* (v6: 1710 to v7: 1909). The Hebrew reader will find, in this full (combined) diary record, Sharett’s rich, detailed descriptions of the personalities he met, many of the speeches he delivered, and the exchanges that took place on the whole range of contemporary controversies, such as the Arab boycott, refugee claims, Israel’s alleged “expansionism,” and its reprisals policy.

4. Even Ambassadors Eliahu Elath (London), Jacob Tsur (Paris), and Abba Eban (Washington) were kept in the dark. See, e.g., the abrupt and embarrassing termination of Abba Eban’s and Reuven Shiloah’s conversation with State Department officials upon the arrival of news of the Israeli invasion of Sinai in Nina J. Noring (ed), United States, Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States: 1955–1957*, v16: Suez Crisis: July 26–December 31, 1956 (Washington, DC, 1990) 825 [doc. 406]; Abba Eban, *Personal Witness: Israel through My Eyes* (New York, 1992) 258; Michael Brecher, *Decisions in Israel’s Foreign Policy* (New Haven, CN, 1975) 279 (esp. n. 2).

5. Sharett’s brief accounts of his reports to the Cabinet (16 December), the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee (18 December), and the Mapai Central Committee (20 December) are given in Sharett, *Yoman Ishiv*, v7, 1920–2, 1926.

6. On 4 October 1956, a band of Beduin ambushed and murdered five potash workers near Sdom.

7. The fighting at Qalqilya, and the political and military aftermath, are described in Morris, *Israel’s Border Wars*, 397–402.

8. Ben-Gurion’s Knesset statement of 15 October 1956, translated extracts reproduced in Meron Medzini (ed), *Israel’s Foreign Relations: Selected Documents 1947–1974* (Jerusalem, 1976) v1, 357–64 [doc. 27] [Hebrew].

9. In a speech to the meeting of 18 January 1957 of the central committee of Ihud Ha-Kvutzot ve-ha-Kibbutzim at Kibbutz Givat-Haim, Ben-Gurion openly claimed that the removal of Sharett in June 1956 had been an integral step (the second of five stages) for assuring Israel's vital security needs in the face of mounting Arab threats; cf. Sharett, *Yoman Ishi*, v7, 1936–7.

10. Bulganin to Ben-Gurion, 5 November 1956, text in Medzini (ed), *Israel's Foreign Relations*, vi, 557–8 [doc. 7].

11. For the full Hebrew text of this “victory speech” of 7 November 1956, see *David Ben-Gurion, Rosh ha-Memshala ha-Rishon: Mivhar Te'udot*, eds. Yemima Rosenthal and Eli Shaltiel (Jerusalem, 1996), 341–6 [doc. 92] [Hebrew]; translated excerpts are in Medzini (ed), *Israel's Foreign Relations*, vi, 559–63 [doc. 8]. The speech caused consternation among Israel's friends and allies around the world. See Neil Caplan, “Oom-Shmoom Revisited: Israeli Attitudes towards the UN and the Great Powers, 1948–1960,” in Abraham Ben-Zvi and Aharon Klieman (eds), *Global Politics: Essays in Honour of David Vital* (London, 2001), 186–7, and sources cited in n. 50 there.

12. Eisenhower to Ben-Gurion, 7 November 1956, and Ben-Gurion to Bulganin, 7 November 1956, both in Medzini (ed), *Israel's Foreign Relations*, vi, 563–4 [doc. 9] and 558–9 [doc. 7] [Hebrew].

13. Text of the midnight broadcast (0:30 A.M., 9 November) in Rosenthal and Shaltiel (eds), *David Ben-Gurion*, 348–51 [doc. 94]. English translation (extracts) can be found in Medzini (ed), *Israel's Foreign Relations*, vi, 567–8 [doc. 12].

14. See the assessment of nationalist, anti-colonialist resentment offered by Elie Kedourie in his *Nationalism in Asia and Africa* (London, 1970) 1–152.

15. These were the headlines of the story covering Ben-Gurion's midnight broadcast to the nation. Cf. diary entry for 9 November, and n. 12, above.

16. Sharett's escapist fantasy was never realized. India and Israel established full diplomatic relations only in January 1992.

17. Upon his return from Asia, Sharett shared with Ben-Gurion his anguish at being ignored and left in the dark while abroad during these two crucial incidents. Elaborating on the same topic later that day with another high-ranking Mapai official, Sharett said: “[H]ad I received a cable saying, ‘Prepare yourself for a surprise. Believe that the step is vital. Courage!’ I would have been able to better prepare myself and I would also have known that I had not been forgotten.” *Yoman Ishi*, v7, 1914–5, entry for 12 December 1956.

18. The respected poet and journalist, Natan Alterman, wrote a popular weekly column, entitled “The Seventh Column,” in the Labour Party daily, *Davar*.

19. Cf. Avi Shlaim, *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World* (London, 2000) 185: “Ben-Gurion failed to topple Nasser [in the Suez-Sinai war] but he succeeded in toppling Sharett.”