

**I**n mid-January 1957, Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion for the first time visited Sinai, conquered from Egypt two months before in Operation Kadesh, the Sinai Campaign. One of the stops in the airborne (Dakota) whistle-stop tour was Sharm-e-Sheikh, the campaign's main flashpoint and gateway to the disputed Straits of Tiran and the Gulf of Eilat - or Akaba. Ben-Gurion noticed POWs were working near the former Egyptian naval station. "They are straightening a road... But the roles have changed since the Pharaoh's time: The Egyptians are busy working, and the Jews are overseeing them."

The campaign's other flashpoint was the Gaza Strip, the main staging point for Palestinian terrorist and guerrilla raids on Israel in the years before the Sinai Campaign. One of the campaign's major objectives was to put a stop to these raids, which had turned the Israeli border settlements during 1952-56 into an extended combat zone. The Strip fell to Israeli assault in the first days of November 1956.

The UN and U.S. wanted the IDF to withdraw. Israel's political and

circumstances. (The Strip and its retention) should not be the cause of jeopardising our future security and (the cause of) our isolation in the world community..."

A MAJOR SOURCE of information about Israeli decision-making regarding the fate of occupied Sinai and the Gaza Strip was opened to researchers this week, with the declassification of the bulk of Ben-Gurion's diary, housed in Sde Boker, for 1957. Read together with the diary entries for 1956, the basic contours of the debate and of the evolution of Ben-Gurion's thinking leading up to the eventual withdrawal at the end of March 1957, can now be satisfactorily traced.

In the week-long Sinai Campaign, which began on October 29 and ended on November 5, 1956, the IDF occupied the whole of the Sinai Peninsula and the Gaza Strip, a chunk of British Mandate Palestine occupied by Egypt in 1948 and held by Egypt ever since. On November 2 in mid-war, the UN General Assembly in emergency session passed a resolution calling for a withdrawal of foreign forces (Israeli, British and French) from

*In the aftermath of the Sinai Campaign*

## Areas of indecision

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military leaders were of two minds about staying in the Strip. The debate raged for months. On 3 March 1957, shortly before the IDF evacuation, Ben-Gurion spelled out the disincentives: "Gaza itself - it is a terrible problem (*tzara tzura*) under any circumstances, under Egyptian rule, under Israeli rule, under UN rule or under mixed government. The worst situation - (when the Strip is) under Egyptian rule. Somewhat less grave - Israeli rule alone. The danger is multiple. Materially - how will we maintain 200,000 refugees and 60,000 permanent residents?"

"But still greater is the political danger. There can be no doubt that the refugees and others will carry out terrorist attacks. Will we be able (if we rule) to suppress them, like the English in Cyprus and the French in Algeria? Without solving the refugee problem, meaning their (re-)settlement in an Arab country - the Gaza Strip will remain a curse and danger under any

Egyptian territory and for a ceasefire. Almost immediately, the U.S. and the Soviet Union began applying strong pressure on Israel for unconditional withdrawal. On November 7, the General Assembly voted to set up an Emergency Force to oversee the cessation of hostilities in Egypt.

The shock of the instant, firm U.S.-Soviet line-up against Israel (and France and Britain) in early November 1956 was clearly apparent in the despatches to Jerusalem from Israel's ambassador to the UN, Abba Eban.

Eban, Ben-Gurion said on November 8, was "full of fears. His despatches also sow fear and dread." The Americans had threatened to cut off all ties with Jerusalem; to stop all aid; and "perhaps to throw us out of the UN. Apparently they are afraid of Russia," was Ben-Gurion's assessment of Washington's motivation.

But Israel, according to the



(David Rubinger)

At the beginning of January 1957, Israeli intelligence sources learned that Israel's Arab minority intended to commemorate the massacre two months earlier of 47 Arabs in Kafr Kassim by border policemen.

Ziama Divon, the Arab affairs expert, informed Ben-Gurion on January 2, "The Communists are planning... strikes and demonstrations."

Ben-Gurion: "Let them have strikes as much as they like."

Divon: "Next Sunday they are planning a large demonstration in Nazareth."

Ben-Gurion: "I said not to allow the demonstration, and not to use force but cold water to break it up."

Divon: "They will only use batons..."

Ben-Gurion: "No! The use of batons could cause bloodshed."



Ben-Gurion: 'Gaza itself is a terrible problem under any circumstances'; the Strip is still 'a curse and danger' decades later. (Israel Sun)

## Ben-Gurion and Meir Har-Zion

In March 1957, Ben-Gurion, after a visit to an ear and nose specialist at Tel Hashomer, summoned Segen Meir Har-Zion, the legendary Unit 101 and paratroop officer, the only IDF soldier ever to receive a commission without going through an officer's course.

Har-Zion had participated in many of the Unit 101 and paratroop retaliatory raids in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, had been cited a number of times for bravery, and had been wounded repeatedly. He was considered the army's best scout and commando leader.

He had also been at least once to Petra, the fabled "Red Rock" 40 km. into Jordan, which had become a prime objective of young Israeli adventurers (often serving or ex-paratroopers out to prove their scouting abilities and machismo. Four Israeli youngsters had just died at Jordanian hands, having failed to make it back from Petra.

"It appears," wrote Ben-Gurion of Har-Zion on March 28, 1957, "that he not only went to Lebanon (on another of these adventure excursions) but knew about the foursome's trip to Petra. The paratroopers among them consulted him before they set out and Meir complains that they did not heed his advice to walk only at night."

He told the premier that things would have gone smoothly if they had listened to him, adding that he had made the journey successfully.

B-G: "I said that this was a foolish, criminal act, and that he should be tried and punished with the

most severe punishment, because he was causing the death of young and invaluable people."

However, B-G was willing to waive punishment if Har-Zion would solemnly promise him "that he would not do this ever again...and would not advise others to go, though I don't know whether one can rely on his word, although I tend to believe a person so long as I have not discovered that he is a cheat. Meir hesitated for a time and, at last, gave me his word.

"After talking for a while longer, he added that it was possible that there would be changed circumstances and then he would do it (i.e., go to Petra). I said, 'Promise me that in that event, before you do anything you will come to me and say that your promise is cancelled.' This time he hesitated for a longer time - and in the end promised me that he would do so and gave me his hand."

The somewhat unusual encounter between the prime minister and the lieutenant was to have a rapid sequel. The following evening, after Friday night dinner at his daughter Renana's home, a bunch of "friends" arrived, including the paratroop brigade commander (and Har-Zion's superior), Ariel Sharon.

"I took Arik aside and told him about the conversation with Meir. At the end of my story, Arik said that Meir, in an emotional state, had woken him in the middle of the night, saying that he had to tell him something urgently. He had come over and told him about the conversation with me. He [Arik] felt that it had been a great experience for Meir. Arik is also certain that Meir will keep his word."

director-general of the Prime Minister's Office, Ya'acov Herzog, was speaking in many voices: To Eisenhower, Ben-Gurion had written that Israel would withdraw only after "signing a peace agreement" with Egypt; Eban had been informed by the Foreign Ministry that the IDF would not withdraw from Sinai; and in the Knesset the Government had announced that there was "a difference between Sinai and Egypt" (meaning that France and Britain might be forced to withdraw from Egypt proper whereas Israel might remain in Sinai). Herzog believed that Israel's occupation of Sinai "was the only card (held by Israel) which could compel (Egypt) to make peace."

THAT Israel was initially far from thinking in terms of a withdrawal from the Gaza Strip is clear from Ben-Gurion's description, of 14 November 1956, of a meeting with Ziam Divon, a Foreign Ministry Arab affairs expert. Divon told him that Foreign Minister Golda Meir "had ordered Divon and Ezra (Danin, another former intelligence executive and Arab expert) to prepare (i.e., persuade) the inhabitants of Gaza to express their view that they did not want to return to Egyptian rule, but (preferred) to stay under Israeli authority."

That Israel would essentially have to comply with the UN withdrawal resolution - pressed by both the USSR and the United States - was clear from the start. The question was whether it would withdraw from all of Sinai, including Sharm-e-Sheikh, and from the Gaza Strip. Whatever the ultimate decision, "we will withdraw very slowly," Ben-Gurion told his aides on November 26.

From the first, Israel's main objectives and principles were clear in the prime minister's mind: • to prevent the return of the Egyptian army to Sinai, • to assure freedom of navigation (down the Gulf and through the straits), • no return of the Egyptians (to the Strip) since they invaded Gaza, • the refugee problem to be solved by settling them in the Arab countries.

Incidentally, he said on November 30, Israel would assist financially in the refugees' resettlement and "would resettle some of the Gaza refugees in (Israel), insofar as it is possible."

When it came to the Gaza Strip and possible withdrawal, the military were, from the first, more steadfast than the politicians. Moshe Dayan, the IDF chief of general staff, at a senior policy-making meeting on 21 December, was for withdrawing eastwards only as far as El Arish "and there we'll stay."

Ben-Gurion thought that while this might make practical sense, it could hardly be acceptable to Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser. "As to Gaza, said Ben-Gurion, "while I have not yet formed a final opinion, (I believe) it is not desirable to demand or carry out an annexation. (It is best) to maintain Israeli services - transportation, health, education, and above all police, and to co-opt the UN in the supervision..."

This line - of effective Israeli rule in cooperation with the UN - was to emerge as Ben-Gurion's standard position, before he ultimately agreed to complete Israeli withdrawal and a UN takeover, which was followed by an Egyptian non-military return to the Strip. As he argued at the cabinet meeting of December 23, Israel could not "digest 300,000 Arabs but the Egyptians should not be allowed to return, and there is no relying on a UN army. Such an army could not prevent Egyptian agents from organizing fedayeen anew and activating them."

Ahdut Ha'avoda's Moshe Carmel, like Dayan, was for halting the withdrawal at the El Arish line. And Mapam, interestingly, while "opposing (Carmel's) demand, demanded the annexation of Gaza." In fact, the following week at the cabinet meeting of December 31, Mapam backed down from this demand. Carmel backed down on the El Arish line, and only his Ahdut Ha'avodah colleague, Interior Minister Israel Bar-Yehuda, stayed firm, voting for El Arish as a minority of one.

MEANWHILE, the Israeli government mounted a steady rearguard action, against a speedy withdrawal. To reinforce this, Ben-Gurion argued (December 22, 1956) that Israeli public opinion - prompted by the renewal of fedayeen raids, from Jordan, and Egyptian statements that they would not allow Israel freedom of navigation through the straits - was

"growingly opposed to the continuation of the withdrawal."

As to Sharm-e-Sheikh, Ben-Gurion opposed annexation but ruled (at a meeting with senior advisers on December 29, 1956) that Israel should "stay put until assured of freedom of navigation through the straits. A UN resolution or an Egyptian promise will not be sufficient (to get us out). What is needed is an American commitment or something similar." Dayan thought that Israel should tell Washington that it would not pull back from El Arish as well without explicit American assurances. Ben-Gurion disagreed.

But how far was Israel willing to go "in defying the UN's" immediate withdrawal decision? asked Abel Thomas, a French emissary to Jerusalem. Israel was guided by four principles, Ben-Gurion told him on January 5, 1957: "Non-return to the status quo ante; demilitarization of parts of Sinai...; non-return of Egyptian troops and opposition to the entry of UN forces...into the Gaza Strip; and we will leave Sharm-e-Sheikh only if we receive effective and certain guarantees for freedom of passage through the straits."

And what if the U.S. imposed sanctions? asked Thomas. Israel would continue to resist, even if Washington blocked all financial aid. The U.S. might send troops to enforce the decision - but Ben-Gurion didn't believe they would. But if they did, "they would no doubt win." Ben-Gurion estimated that total American economic sanctions would cost Israel \$200 million.

There was only one sanction he feared: oil. Israel would need fuel from France in that event.

The problem of sanctions relentlessly exercised the Israeli leadership. How much will it cost us, how long can we withstand them, Ben-Gurion asked cabinet minister Levi Eshkol on January 7, 1957. Israel could last "three months," answered Eshkol.

BUT BEN-GURION dug in his heels. Israel had to emerge from the fray with solid guarantees regarding both Gaza and the straits - otherwise the campaign would have been in vain. Ben-Gurion was angered by the American position (Continued on page 14)

## Areas of indecision

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on the Gaza Strip (instant and complete withdrawal, followed by a UN presence). The Americans might be economically more powerful, but "morally" Israel and the U.S. were "equals." A UN force would not prevent fedayeen resurgence. "We must fight for a just cause - and American money won't vanquish us." Israel must not withdraw from Sharm or Gaza without firm guarantees, he told his aides on January 7.

The following day, at the meeting of the Knesset Foreign Relations and Defence Committee, Herut Party leader Menachem Begin demanded an immediate halt to the staggered withdrawal. But a consensus formed around Ben-Gurion's two sticking points - Sharm and Gaza, "Come what may." Ben-Gurion was encouraged that day by Eshkol's announcement, after meetings at the Treasury, that Israel could survive even if the U.S. imposed a complete financial embargo.

The following day, the Mapai party chiefs - Kaddish Luz, Mordechai Namir, Ziaman (Zalman) Aranne, Levi Eshkol, Bechor Shitrit - backed Ben-Gurion on the need "to take a chance" and refuse complete withdrawal without guarantees. Namir was afraid that, after the UN declared Israel the aggressor, an Arab state "backed by Russia would destroy Israel. Perhaps this was the U.S. government's aim." Ben-Gurion dismissed this as a "remote threat."

Within weeks, the threat of American sanctions "evaporated, under pressure of the Senate and the press," Eban reported from New York. Israeli firmness had paid off.

At the same time, Israel was ready for "compromise," declared Ben-Gurion on February 16. "We will agree to the army's withdrawal on two conditions: that the Egyptians do not return (to Gaza) and that a partnership be formed between the Israeli administration and the UN. Participation of the (Gaza) inhabitants in the administration is also a possibility."

Dayan came and complained about Israeli weakness. Ben-Gurion told him: "Were our enemies sharp,



UN take-over of positions in the Sinai discussed (from left) by General Burns, Major Dhillon, Captain Bor, Sgan-Aluf Bar-On and Rav-Aluf Dayan.

### Ben-Gurion and the young Ya'acov Leib Talmon

By 1957, Ben-Gurion had led the Yishuv to statehood and had been premier for close to a decade. He was 71. Ya'acov Leib Talmon was a 41-year-old history teacher at the Hebrew University, three years short of his professorship. Five years earlier, Talmon had published *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy*, a pioneering work on the seeds of dictatorial government in ostensibly democracy-seeking revolutionary movements.

Talmon came to see B-G on June 15, 1957.

"His face is like that of a Polish *yeshiva-bocher*, but [he is] an important scholar. I disagreed with his definition, 'totalitarian democracy and liberal democracy.' There is no such thing as totalitarian democracy. He conceded this, but said that the origins of both totalitarianism and democracy are the same, and that is in the desire for 'perfection' (totality) and progress in the 18th and 19th centuries. I said there was a good basis for this aspiration, and that there had been great progress in the 19th century up to the First World War.

"He wants to write a history of Jewish settlement and of the State around a biography of me. He will delegate the preparation of the 'background' material to his students (he praises the young scholars) and he will be responsible for the actual composition. I told him that I would give him the written material - but I would not recount memories, because I haven't the time for it. Certain things it is not yet possible to write about - and I would specify what."

they would give us the Gaza Strip, lock, stock and barrel, with its refugees, and we would have to maintain a quarter of a million Arabs and to suppress with force subversion against our security."

An assurance of international guarantees for freedom of navigation through the straits had been given. The problem of Gaza remained. The breakthrough in the multilateral withdrawal negotiations came in late February, with a French proposal: that Israel announce its withdrawal from the Strip, and that UN forces take over the security and administration of the area. They would remain there until a peace settlement was reached between Israel and Egypt.

IT WASN'T exactly what Israel had been holding out for for three months. But Israel, as Ben-Gurion saw it, now had no choice. As he explained to Dayan on February 28: "We must accept the (French) proposal, because our complete isolation and (the possibility that) France also would move away from us places us in jeopardy - that we will not receive arms."

Dayan disagreed. In his opinion, the arms we possess are sufficient for this year." Ben-Gurion argued back. In the end, he noted in his diary, "I think he was persuaded."

It was clearly the demarche by France, Israel's main, almost only arms supplier and ally in the attack on Egypt, that was decisive: "The French effort to find a solution," Ben-Gurion wrote on March 10, days before the final withdrawal, "in large measure tipped the scales... In rejecting the French proposal I saw a great danger to our future (though) not immediately... the (ultimate) consequences of such a rejection would be: first, our being ostracized by the UN, including the U.S. - with or without sanctions. This is not crucial, though there would be a type (of sanction, i.e. oil) that would beat us... Second, a year or two down the line, it is possible that Nasser or his successor will attack... He would have excellent, modern Soviet weaponry. I am not sure we would then receive weapons from France. From others, certainly not... (And perhaps we would then be defeated on the battlefield)... In order to (hold on to) Gaza I am not willing to take upon myself such a grave eventuality..."

So, Ben-Gurion's fears of international isolation, including an arms embargo that could include the French, were what finally persuaded him to relent on the withdrawal from Gaza and to agree to the UN's replacing the IDF as governor.

A year after the start of the campaign, on October 28, 1957, Ben-Gurion summarized the war's "achievements" (which, incidentally, were not quite the same as the objectives of the war itself or the rearguard battle against withdrawal):

"Increase of the Diaspora's link with Israel; honour and admiration for the IDF throughout the world; deterring neighbouring countries from attacking Israel for several years; undermining Nasser's hegemony (in the Arab world); relative (and temporary) quiet on the borders; freedom of navigation in Eilat and the Red Sea; recognition by the maritime nations of the right to defend navigation; an oil pipeline from Eilat to the Mediterranean and a chance for an alternative to the Suez Canal." □