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A profound and dramatic change has taken place, these last two months, in the political atmosphere of the Middle East. For the first time in the 19 years of Israel-Arab relations, a situation has been created in which the peoples of this region may look forward, in hope and expectation, to a brighter future.

The seeds of the military conflict that has just come to an end were sown a long time ago. I do not know how many people in the world today are fully aware of what it has meant to us in Israel to have the sombre threat of war hanging over our heads for nearly two decades. Hardly a day has passed, in the course of this entire period, when some Arab leader or other official Arab source has not proclaimed, for all the world to hear, that the Arab States (1) refused to recognize Israel's right of sovereign existence, (2) considered themselves to be in a state of war with Israel, and (3) were actively preparing for the day when this formal state of war could be converted into a shooting war in which the State of Israel and its inhabitants were to be utterly destroyed.

This, until today, has been the basis of Israel-Arab relations. This is the root cause of the friction and disquiet that have plagued the Middle East and that, a few weeks ago, erupted into open conflict.

About two months ago, it appears that the Arab governments decided that the time was ripe for the long-planned and long-promised joint attack on Israel. Aggressive moves by Egypt's President Nasser signalled the advent of the assault. These moves were spread over a period of some three weeks, during which Israel patiently and anxiously awaited some sort of international action that would head off the coming conflict. The nations of the world were fully aware of what was happening in the Middle East. Yet no effective counter-move

materialized, and Nasser's war plan was allowed to run its course.

Let me briefly recapitulate Nasser's five moves to war:

On May 14 the Egyptian dictator began a massive build-up of troops and armour which grew from day to day until, by early June, an offensive array of some 100,000 troops and 1,000 tanks and other equipment was lined up on Israel's southern and southwestern border.

On May 17 he ordered the immediate evacuation of the UN Emergency Force;

On May 23 Nasser set up a battery of shore guns at the entrance to the Gulf of Aqaba, and announced that henceforth this international waterway would be closed to Israel-bound shipping.

On May 30 Nasser and King Hussein of Jordan signed an aggressive military pact (a few days later joined by Iraq) whose avowed aim was the "tightening of the noose" around Israel's neck.

On ~~the~~ the morning of June 5 Nasser gave the order to move against Israel.

Even at this late stage, the war could have remained limited in scope. We appealed to King Hussein and to other neighbours to stay their hand - and Israel would do likewise. However, Jordan joined in the Egyptian attack, and opened a concerted shell fire on Jerusalem. We were left no choice but to fight for our land and our lives.

Now, what of the future? First and foremost, it should now be clear to all that the past is gone beyond recall: there can be no return to the situation that existed here before June 5. The people of Israel is not prepared to go back to the so-called armistice regime, initiated in 1949, which was not an armistice at all

but - through the unilateral choice of the Arab governments - a continuous state of terror, infiltration, threats and preparations for full-scale war.

I am sure that, if it were up to the peoples of the neighbouring Arab States, they too would set their faces to the improvement of their lot, the development of commerce and industry, and the initiation of an era of peace and tranquility.

Once we begin to look in this direction, the possibilities are almost limitless.

Coming back by plane, the other day, from a visit to Sharm el-Sheikh, at the southern tip of the Sinai peninsula, I flew over the eastern Negev, the Dead Sea and that refreshing oasis of vigorous life: the kibbutz of Ein Gedi. There is no more exhilarating experience than to gaze upon that once entirely barren and forlorn wasteland and to see how that landscape is being ~~is~~ changed, continually, by the sheer will of forward-looking men and women to change it! And I asked myself: With a little vision, a little imagination, a modicum of good will and a readiness for cooperation - could we not launch such a programme, together with our Arab neighbours, for the vast areas of as yet untilled and undeveloped land that is still to be found throughout the Middle East?

The Arab refugee problem, too, stands finally on the threshold of a solution. The establishment of peace between Israel and her neighbours will, one and for all, put an end to that 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. The Government of Israel is determined to take advantage} ~~of the refugee question.~~ ^{of the conditions that have now been} ~~The Government~~

created to take whatever steps lie within its power to work for such a solution. Towards this end, a special commission has been set up to study ways of rebuilding the lives of these people and reintegrating them in the normal social and economic life of the area.

Also, the Government has announced that those inhabitants of the West Bank of the Jordan River who left their homes between June 7th and July 4th and crossed over to the East Bank, to join their relatives there or for whatever other reason, will be permitted, in the course of the coming month, to return to their homes - provided they give satisfactory evidence that they lived in the West Bank immediately prior to June 7th and do not constitute a security risk.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

The peoples of the Middle East today stand at the crossroads. The way is open for cooperation and peace, through direct talks between the parties, and the start of a new era in this region - or to a return to the chaos of hostility, terror and war.

On the choice that is made, hinges the peace of the Middle East and the welfare of its inhabitants.
