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The Drums of War in the Middle East, 1967.

War Drums In The Middle East
Daniel Jeremy Silver
April 16, 1967

On a Friday morning ten days ago a tractor left the barn of the border village of Halan and set out for the fields to begin the spring cultivation. Within an hour this tractor was shelled by Syrian gun placements high above the village in the hills just east of the Sea of Galilee. Within an hour four border villages had been badly bombed, and before the day was out six Syrian supersonic MIG 41 fighter planes had been blasted from the sky. Friday, ten days ago, was the day on which there was one of the most serious of the border outbreaks which have occurred since the armistice of 1948, reminded the world that this border is violent and volatile and that peace in the Middle East is still a house of cards which can go up in flames in an instant. Now why had this tractor been shelled? Had the Israelis gone out to cultivate disputed land and so to lay claim to territory which had not been until then their own? Not at all. The same tractor from the same village had cultivated the same field for each of the nineteen springs since the armistice. Why then had the tractor been shelled? By way of answer I must take you back to the late summer of last year when after two years of continuing infiltration and terrorism from Syria, Lebanon and the Jordan, some from the Ghaza strip, the Israelis finally lost their patience and set about doing that which is the prime requirement of any government - protecting the life and the security of its citizens. After some 350 acts of sabotage and some 1500 known infiltrations of Israel the government allowed the army to undertake two lightning retaliatory attacks: one an air force attack on Syrian construction equipment building a diversionary dam in the upper reaches of the Jordan river, a dam designed to prevent the waters from ever reaching Israel; the other a daylight attack upon the village of Elsamu in Jordan, a village which had been for many months the base of terrorist attack against Israel. The world which had watched rather passively the two years of terrorism and sabotage suddenly was disturbed. The world began to demand that

peace be brought to this troubled region. And during the fall and early winter of 1966 the United Nations, through the person of the Secretary-General, tried desperately to find ways of bringing conference, adjustment, mediation. He finally determined to call back into being what is known as the Israel Syrian Mixed Armistice Commission. Representatives of the two governments who had met originally in 1948 to adjudicate the cease-fire and who had not met since because of Syria's refusal to admit the legal existence of Israel as a State. The pretext for this meeting which Mr. Outhan hoped would grow into something more important was the need to straighten out and to rationalize the boundaries between Israel and Syria in the Galilee region, a boundary which now follows the curves and the jagged indentations of the Israeli trenches as of 1948. Both sides would seem to gain by some exchange of territory which would straighten out the boundary lines and make the lines of demarkation much clearer. Israel agreed to the conference. Israel agreed to submit to this conference a proposal for the exchange of certain territories, and Israel agreed further not to till the narrow demilitarized zone immediately behind its territorial boundaries lest the existence of crops in this area prevent the bartering of territories. Under a great deal of pressure from the Soviet Union the Syrians agreed to meet. The first meeting was held in January of this year. The Israelis made their presentation. The Syrians remained silent.

The United Nations called for another meeting two weeks later. The Israelis renewed their presentation and the Syrians simply laid claim to all the land which is demilitarized that is within the Israeli border. The Syrians had not come to this conference to exchange territory but to gain territory. After two more fruitless meetings called by the United Nations, Israel said that there was no further benefit from continuing meetings and the ISMAC, the Israel Syrian Mixed Armistice Commission, ceased to meet as of early March of this year. Israel then went back to the status before the meetings

and it made plans to seed these fields as it had done in previous years. The Syrian attack then was a military statement of the political claim put forward at these meetings to a great deal of land which lies between the Israeli boundary and the borders which Israel is allowed to arm according to the 1948 agreements. It is an attempt to extend Syrian territory and to place Israel more at a disadvantage.

Why then the sudden escalation of the shelling of this single tract? Because, frankly, in the summer of 1966 Israel's patience came to an end. For two years the Israelis had defended themselves against the marauders. For two years the Israelis had restrained their understandable anger and bitterness. For two years the Arab states which neighbor on Israel had been allowed the privilege of developing terrorist activities, infiltration tactics against Israel from a privileged sanctuary. They were safe from counter attack. They were safe from reprisal. The only damage which could be inflicted in such a war was against Israel. Time and again Israel made representations in the United Nations. Time and again the United Nations had filed the report and time and again this report had not led to effective pressure or action against Syria, Jordan, the two states from which most of the infiltration took place. Israeli lives were lost, some thirty of them in two years. Millions of dollars of Israeli property was destroyed. The Israelis refused to resort to the subterfuge of attacking at night, of undertaking terrorist activity of their own, and in the open daylight and in a perfectly public way they began to take reprisal action against Jordan, Syria, and a new doctrine was announced by Mr. Eshkol, the Prime Minister of Israel. No longer would Israel be passive, but she will pursue the marauders even across the borders from which they had come from and if Jordanian or Syrian or Egyptian planes attacked Israel they would be pursued back to their bases. The pace, then, of escalation was raised and the price of attack was raised. Israel

sought thereby to choke off this infiltration, this terrorism, at its source.

There is danger, increasing danger, along the borders of the Middle East. There is a danger that such an instant can quickly be aggravated and that war can spread along the great land borders of Israel and a repetition of 1956 or of 1948 take place. This danger is real and probable, but I think that it is clear to most observers that for the moment, at least, it may not take place. The interesting and significant fact of ten days ago is that neither the Jordanian nor the Egyptian government rushed to the support of the Syrian government. Neither Nasser nor Hussein was prepared at the moment to risk his armies or his air force in an attack on Israel. Not that Hussein and Nasser have abandoned their plans to erase Israel, to blot it out; not that either Jordan or Egypt denies the Syrian proposition and that the Arab states remain in the continuous state of war against Israel, but rather that they have other preoccupations at the moment, other priorities which preclude 1967 as the year for the final solution. Nasser is concerned first and foremost with South Arabia. For three years he has fought a difficult and costly and bloody war in the Yemen, not only to gain control of this hilly and poor nation for his revolutionary cause, but rather because he had seen from the beginning that Yemen is an effective jump-off point from which he can stake his claim to the oil-rich, small principalities of South Arabia, Aden and the principal states which Great Britain has governed until now. England has announced that as of 1968 she will abandon her control over these shiekhdoms and Nasser is determined to relieve his bankruptcy, to solve his financial crisis, by taking unto himself the black gold which flows so liberally in these little countries. And so he is even now equipping 25,000 Adanese and Yemenite tribes who infiltrate these countries and take over the leadership of the nationalist cause. His agents are busy in Oden and elsewhere combatting the agents of Saudi Arabia who are competing with him for control, and behind the infiltrators and the tribespeople are his five effective divisions in

the Yemen who can quickly move across the border and consolidate his gains. These little oil-rich states represent to Nasser the opportunity to complete and to capitalize each and every one of his Napoleonic schemes and Israel, for the moment, can wait. Once he has oil, the revenues, then he can choose his time and his place and his weapons for the final solution.

King Hussein's problems are of another nature. Hussein sits on a shaky throne. Hussein's claim to the throne is substantiated only by the effectiveness of his loyal army. That army is entirely equipped by and financed by the United States and Great Britain. Within the borders of Jordan there is a large second force of pro-Egyptian Nasserites, largely among the Palestinian Arabs. Syria and Egypt have long since given rifles and guns to these people. They have long since called for the assassination of Hussein. Just this past week Nasser called Hussein "traitor, libertine and adulterer" as he called for his death. King Hussein is not prepared to undertake any act which might bleed his army and thereby weaken his throne and so, for the moment, he, too, is not prepared for the final solution.

The only country which borders on Israel which is militarily active and ambitious is the anarchy which is today called Syria. Syria is in chaos. It has had five governments in the last two years. Those who present themselves with diplomatic credentials in Damascus often do not know to whom they must present their certificates of appointment. The State is near bankruptcy. The army is a separate force. There are competing elements in the army and all of this confusion and all of this chaos tends to lead, to spin off, into a continuing activity of war and of terrorism against Israel. Israel is the safety valve, the psychological safety valve, for Syria.

Neither Cairo nor Aman has been particularly pleased by this Syrian beligerency. As you know, for several years the Arab states have been attempting to coordinate

a timetable, a military strategy, and the Syrian activity, time and again, roils waters which should not be muddied. Nevertheless, Syria continues to finance the terrorist activity and the retaliation of ten days ago no more than the retaliation of last summer has cooled off the Syrian hotheads. Two days after the MIG's were thrown out of the skies the Israelis found land mines planted along their northern border. Five days after the attack an Israeli border village was shelled. Seven days after the attack the Israelis captured and killed two marauders who had crossed over from the Jordan, and just yesterday another marauding patrol armed with Syrian passports and Russian guns was trapped within Israel and three of its members were killed.

The incidents continue. The tension is palpable, it mounts. We may have, and probably do have, some months before this entire area erupts into war and so the question is what can be done to make peace a possibility in the Middle East. It is well to recognize before we confront this problem that the Middle East in 1967 is not the Middle East of 1956. In 1956, just before the Suez crisis when Russia, also sponsoring the military armament of Egypt, Egypt was in a sense a paper tiger, she had a great deal of weapons and her troops were not trained nor equipped to handle these weapons and Israel was able to knife through the Egyptian defenses in a matter of hours.

The former secretary of our air force and presently the senator, Stuart Symington, recently completed a trip about the world in which he spent a good bit of time in Egypt, three weeks ago in a report to the Foreign Affairs Committee and to the Armed Forces Committee of the United States Senate, he made this report on the Egyptian army:

It comprises today 350,000 men. It is one of the best equipped and best led armies in the world. It controls 550 supersonic aircraft, fighters, bombers, tactical support. It has within its arsenal, ground to air, air to ground, and ground to ground missiles. Russian training has paid off in material and supply,

in technology, in the ability of the officers and of the lower cadres of the officers to lead the men. It is seasoned by three years of fighting in Yemen. It is an effective and efficient fighting force.

This could not have been said about the Egyptian army ten years ago. What is true about the military situation in the Middle East is a simple fact of a steady, accelerated arms race, and Russia has been the major supplier of arms. In the last five years the Soviet Union has sold or given to the Egyptian government almost three billion dollars' worth of the most sophisticated weaponry in the world and the Egyptians have learned the techniques of using these guns. Israel, as an advanced technological state, no longer faces states which are below its level of technology and of ability. The Egyptian army is today one of the efficient armies of the world. And the Jordanian army of today is not the Palestine legion of ten years ago, a small army, well-equipped with a few tanks and a few machine guns. The United States has sold to the Jordan the fastest of our jets, the F104; the heaviest of our tanks, the Centurians. One hundred and fifty thousand men of the Jordanian army are a well trained fighting force and they are a well led force. They have been trained by western European officers and men. And so is beginning to move into the 20th century in terms of its military establishment. The last year the Soviet Union has pledged to Syria almost one billion dollars' worth of equipment. Sixteen hundred Soviet technicians are now in that land training its officers and training its military cadres and, for the moment, it must be said that Syria does not know how to use these weapons, it cannot use them effectively, though for the moment all is chaos and confusion the Soviets have a way in time of sewing up order out of confusion and of bringing military efficiency into a land where none had existed.

So Israel no longer has that unique superiority of knowhow of 20th century technology. Israel does have a well-equipped army. Israel does have some of the most

sophisticated weaponry in the world, but now it can no longer feel itself confident, ^{that} it will emerge essentially undamaged and unscathed from a fast missile and jet war.

The nations of the Middle East, dear friends, need not war but peace. Their economies are badly strained. Egypt is near bankruptcy. Syria is literally bankrupt. Jordan depends entirely upon the United States to pay for its military activity and most of its budget. Israel, as you know, spends almost fifteen percent of Israel's national product on weapons. It could far better spend this money on schools and roads and hospitals and industry and the like. Israel wants peace, but there is no peace. The nations, the peoples of the Middle East, need peace, but there is no peace, only the need of it. How can it be established? It will not be established for the moment by bilateral negotiation. The Arab states will not negotiate with Israel. Israel has offered time and again to negotiate any and all outstanding differences, but that offer will not be taken up. The only real hope for peace in the Middle East, I believe, is what lies with the two great powers of the west, ^{with} the Soviet Union and with the United States. If these two gigantic, colossai truly want detente, truly want to create in Europe and in the Middle East and in the world a condition which will make possible the peaceful growth of their economies, which will make possible man's ultimate hope to be freed of the terrorism of atomic war, if this is truly desired by these great nations surely they can manage through their economic and political pressures by refusing to sell and to give these great hordes of weapons to these small nations, surely they can manage to create in the Middle East the possibility of peace. The Middle East would not be as tense as it is today if five years ago the Soviet Union had not determined to support in a major way all of General Nasser's and President Elcasehn's military and political ambitions. Had the Soviet Union not introduced this massive armament into the Middle East no one could really think of a war of obliteration, of battles of annihilation. And when one of the great powers, for whatever reasons it has, if one of the

great powers to subvert the central nations, Turkey and Pakistan, who are oriented to the west, whether it be to push the Allies out of their economic privileges in the Middle East, whether it be to embarrass the United States and Vietnam by opening a separate front, whatever be the reason, when one of the great powers intrudes into an area and throws in the vastness of its economic and political power, then the other nation must respond with men, with equipment, with loans and materials, and so once the Soviet Union made the decision to support in this major way, in this major military way, General Nasser the United States made a similar decision to support Saudi Arabia, to support Jordan, to allow Israel to buy a certain amount of arms from the United States. And the pace of the arms race accelerates. This is not the way. There is no advantage here to Israel, to the Arab states or to the world. The Middle East remains a tinderbox and if that tinder box goes up in flames so the world goes up in flames. If the great nations of the world want peace, then they must find a way to agree among themselves not to disrupt the arms balance in the Middle East, to encourage those joint programs of possible economic progress, the Jordan Valley Authority and the like, which might make possible the beginnings of cooperation among Middle Eastern nations. They must find ways of guaranteeing the borders of these nations against attack from across the borders. They must find ways of working conjointly rather than in competition.

What is the hope for Israel? Israel has little control over this situation. She must remain strong. She must continue to build up her deterrent force. She must make the opportunity for attack, for successful attack, dim, but this is a negative policy. It cannot take her far. She needs the understanding of the friendship of the great powers. She needs a pledge of friendship especially from the United States, a pledge which would guarantee the borders. She needs time. She needs the cooperation of the great powers of the world in stabilizing the world, that volatile, excitable world in which she lives.

In time I remain convinced that the Arabs themselves, the majority of the Arabs, the poor, the underfed, the illiterate, the peasant, the filahin, the man who suffers because of the military ambitions of his leader, the man whose stomach and the stomachs of whose children remain undernourished because his leaders are plunging the national wealth such as it is into weaponry and into ambition. I remain convinced that there will be a true revolution in the Middle East, not the ideological, superficial revolution that Nasser represents, but a popular revolution which will demand that the leadership of Egypt, the leadership of Syria, the leadership of Jordan, do that which leadership must ultimately do to solve the needs of its own citizenship, that it will create a new kind of government which will be interested in economic reform, in land reform, in education, in housing, in healing and all that permits life, which will not allow these great sums of money, 637 millions of dollars a year, to be spent by poor nations teetering on the brink of bankruptcy, nations in which the standard of living slips down each year, from spending this kind of money in foolish enterprise, but until that time comes, and we pray that it will come quickly, we pray also that the great leaders and the great powers of the world who recognize that peace is more than a word, that politics is more than the justifications of one's economic ambitions, that it is time, high time, that they turn each of them from their expansionist ambitions of competition to cooperation, of war to peace, that they give over their great talents to the calming of the world, the soothing of the bitterness, to the building of the bridges, that instead of a world aflame with enmity and anger, loud with resonance of explosion, they build the world for us which will be a world in which we can live, in which our children can find a peaceful life. It will not be easy. There is very little in the affairs of states at the moment which give one confidence that this is indeed the ambition of the great leaders of the world, but it is the only way, the way of arms race, the way of narrow

economic ambition, the way that fans the hatred of small nations, that way is the way of national suicide.



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Kaddish

Friday APRIL 14

Sunday 16

Those who passed away this week

LILLIAN BASS

MAX FREEDMAN

MARY TOMARKIN

Gahrzeits

SHELDON WOHLWERTH

HYLMA I. WALLACH

JOSEPH H. LICHTIG

HORTENSE G. HAVRE

ISADORE R. LEVY

MAX DAVIDSON

MATILDA SHARLITT

CHARLES LEDERER

DR. JOSEPH L. FETTERMAN

MARTHA SILBERBACH

ABRAHAM KAPLAN

MORRIS J. BROWN

THERESA N. BING

ALFRED A. FREEDHEIM

OTTO GREENE

ISAAC NATHAN

ISAAC MARKS

NATHAN SCHLESINGER

SAMUEL NEWMAN

HATTIE S. BRAHAM

ROSE MASCHKE

MYRON H. MORREAU

JOSEPH WEIZENHOF

CORA LEDERER

FANNIE C. EISENMAN

DOLLIE HABER

MIKE ROSENBERG

CLARICE E. AUERBACH

STEPHEN BERT KELLER