

**Surrounded by hostile armies on all its land frontiers . . . embattled, blockaded, besieged, Israel alone among the nations faces a battle for its security anew with every approaching nightfall and ever rising dawn.**

*Abba Eban  
United Nations, November 2, 1956*



**(Top)** Since the first immigrants struggled to farm the land, agriculture has played a major role in the social and economic development of Israel.

**(Bottom)** Israeli troops advance into the Sinai desert during the Suez crisis.

## COMING OF AGE

With the Arab nations refusing to recognize Israel, its citizens could not travel across the borders of the new state: The train lines that used to go from Jerusalem to Arab cities now ran into minefields and barbed wire at the frontier. “We lived in our hermetically sealed world,” Eban explains. It was a seal frequently broken by terrorist attacks.

Beyond its immediate borders, Israel also lacked allies. Unlike the Arabs who had strategic alliances and a growing stockpile of weapons—from the Soviet Union and other nations—Israel had no sources for arms nor any support for its security.

In Egypt, the new president, Gamal Abdel Nasser, one of the leaders of a revolution that overthrew King Farouk, declared as his goal the destruction of Israel, avenging the defeat of 1948. In July 1956, he nationalized the Suez Canal, which was controlled by the British and French, and closed the Straits of Tiran (at the southern tip of the Sinai peninsula) to Israel, blocking Israel’s only port in the south.

United by a common enemy, the British, French, and Israelis joined forces, and France agreed to supply Israel with much-needed arms. At first in top secret, the three countries strategized a plan to thwart Nasser and recover the canal.

The Sinai Campaign, “The War of 100 Hours,” was led by Israel, whose forces promptly captured the Gaza Strip and Sinai, stopping short of the canal at the request of its allies but taking Sharm el-Sheikh in order to reopen the Straits of Tiran. Britain and France landed their forces and captured most of the canal. The United States (caught up in an election year) and the Soviet Union (involved in its own military enterprise, the invasion of Hungary) stayed out of the conflict, but applied great pressure on the three countries to withdraw. At the United Nations, despite an enthusiastic reception of Israel’s case as articulated by Ambassador Abba Eban, the General Assembly voted for a pullback. The British and French were forced to withdraw, turning over their positions to the United Nations; Israel subsequently also pulled back. For Britain and France, the war marked a diminution in power, “their last appearance,” as Eban puts it, “as great powers in history.” For Israel, despite its forced withdrawal, the Sinai campaign established an important principle—the right to passage for its ships through the Straits of Tiran, which would be protected by UN troops.

In the years following the Sinai campaign, which Eban calls the nation’s “most tranquil decade,” Israel flourished. Immigration increased and building expanded; successful water transport and oil pipeline projects linked desert and cities, north and south. International contacts expanded significantly. The new nation sought to define itself, creating a uniquely Israeli culture that at once

looked ahead and appreciated the past. Interest in the arts, literature, and all kinds of recreation thrived, as did a national passion for archaeology.

Two events deeply disturbed the general sense of calm. The 1961 trial of Adolf Eichmann, who had been responsible for implementing the Nazis' program to exterminate the Jews, had a profound impact. With powerful testimony from witnesses who had survived the Holocaust, the trial, in Eban's words, threw "the very sharpest light on the significance and necessity of Jewish statehood in Israel and on the importance of defending it." Perhaps more than any other event, the trial, held in Jerusalem and covered by close to a thousand foreign correspondents, informed the world of the details of Nazi mass murder. Eichmann was sentenced to death and was executed in 1962.

The issue of relations with West Germany, which had agreed to pay reparations to Israel for confiscated Jewish property and for Jewish slave labor during the Nazi era, also brought out strong emotions among many Israelis. While Ben-Gurion favored normalizing relations between the two nations, passionate controversy erupted between those considering it pragmatic to recognize a new postwar Germany and those who saw reparations as "blood money" whose acceptance would seem to exonerate Germany for responsibility over its past. The Knesset approved the German Compensation Agreement by a narrow margin, and in 1965 the first German ambassador to Israel presented his credentials. In 1966, in a moment fraught with symbolism, then-retired West German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer visited Israel.

As the 1960s progressed, the mood of uneasy peace on Israel's borders was broken as intelligence reports detected a massing of enemy troops.

**In Israel, in order to be a realist you must believe in miracles.**

*David Ben-Gurion*

**Suddenly the meaning and the impact of the creation of the State of Israel became more real and more clear than anything that I had experienced before.**

*Gabriel Bach*

*Assistant Prosecutor, Eichmann trial*



**(Top right)** Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion, shown here with German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, endorsed the normalization of relations with Germany, a position that produced intense controversy in Israel.

**(Bottom right)** The years following the Sinai Campaign were tranquil ones for Israel, which was developing its own unique culture, both ancient and modern, in the Middle East.



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- **What were the political and social ramifications of Israel's isolation? Why did discovering an ally in France mean so much to the Israelis?**
- **What was the strategic importance of the Straits of Tiran to the Israelis?**
- **How would you describe Eban's rhetorical style in his addresses to the United Nations? What makes him an effective spokesperson for the State of Israel?**
- **"Archaeology becomes a national obsession," Eban states. Why do you think Israelis are so interested in the ancient past?**
- **Why did the trial of Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem have such a powerful impact on Israelis—and on the rest of the world?**
- **How would you explain the Israeli public's uneasiness about establishing diplomatic relations with Germany? Why did David Ben-Gurion believe that it was important to push forward on this issue?**