

91 Statement by Prime Minister Begin on US Measures Against Israel- 20 December 1981

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In an unprecedented move, Mr. Begin summoned the United States ambassador to Israel, and read to him the following statement. It was later read to the cabinet and issued to the public. Mr. Begin complained that the U.S. had punished Israel three times in the past six months. Israel was no "vassal state" or a "banana republic." He also hinted of anti-Semitic overtones in some of the punitive measures taken by the United States. Text:

Three times during the past six months, the U.S. Government has "punished" Israel.

On June 7 we destroyed the Iraqi nuclear reactor "Osirak" near Baghdad. I don't want to mention to you today from whom we received the final information that this reactor was going to produce atomic bombs. We had no doubt about that: therefore our action was an act of salvation, an act of national self-defense in the most lofty sense of the concept. We saved the lives of hundreds of thousands of civilians, including tens of thousands of children.

Nonetheless, you announced that you were punishing us - and you left unfilled a signed and sealed contract that included specific dates for the supply of (war) planes.

Not long after, in a defensive act - after a slaughter was committed against our people leaving three dead (including an Auschwitz survivor) and 29 were injured we bombed the PLO headquarters in Beirut.

You have no moral right to preach to us about civilian casualties. We have read the history of World War Two and we know what happened to civilians when you took action against an enemy. We have also read the history of the Vietnam war and your phrase "body-count". We always make efforts to avoid hitting civilian populations, but sometimes it is unavoidable - as was the case in our bombing of the PLO headquarters.

We sometimes risk the lives of our soldiers to avoid civilian casualties.

Nonetheless, you punished us: you suspended delivery of F-15 planes.

A week ago, at the instance of the Government, the Knesset passed on all three readings by an overwhelming majority of two-thirds, the "Golan Heights Law."

Now you once again declare that you are punishing Israel.

What kind of expression is this - "punishing Israel"? Are we a vassal state of yours? Are we a banana republic? Are we youths of fourteen who, if they don't behave properly, are slapped across the fingers?

Let me tell you who this government is composed of. It is composed of people whose lives were spent in resistance, in fighting and in suffering. You will not frighten us with "punishments". He who threatens us will find us deaf to his threats. We are only prepared to listen to rational arguments.

You have no right to "punish" Israel - and I protest at the very use of this term.

You have announced that you are suspending consultations on the implementation of the memorandum of understanding on strategic cooperation, and that your return to these consultations in the future will depend on progress achieved in the autonomy talks and on the situation in Lebanon.

You want to make Israel a hostage of the memorandum of understanding.

I regard your announcement suspending the consultations on the memorandum of as the abrogation (by you) of the memorandum. No "sword of Damocles" is going to hang over our head. So we duly take note of the fact that you have abrogated the memorandum of understanding.

The people of Israel has lived 3,700 years without a memorandum of understanding with America - and it will continue to live for another 3,700. In our eyes it (i.e., the U.S. suspension) is an abrogation of the memorandum.

We will not agree that you should demand of us to allow the Arabs of East Jerusalem to take part in the autonomy elections - and threaten us that if we don't consent you will suspend the memorandum.

You have imposed upon us financial punishments - and have (thereby) violated the word of the President. When Secretary Haig was here he read from a written document the words of President Reagan that you would purchase 200 million dollars worth of Israel arms and other equipment. Now you say it will not be so.

This is therefore a violation of the President's word. Is it customary? Is it proper?

You cancelled an additional 100 million dollars. What did you want to do - to "hit us in our pocket"?

In 1946 there lived in this house a British general by the name of Barker. Today I live here. When we fought him, you called us "terrorists" - and we carried on fighting. After we attacked his headquarters in the requisitioned building of the King David Hotel, Barker said: "This race will only be influenced by being hit in the pocket" - and he ordered his soldiers to stop patronizing Jewish cafes.

To hit us in the pocket - this is the philosophy of Barker. Now I understand why the whole great effort in the Senate to obtain a majority for the arms deal with Saudi Arabia was accompanied by an ugly campaign of anti-Semitism.

First, the slogan was sounded "Begin or Reagan?" - and that meant that whoever opposes the deal is supporting a foreign prime minister and is not loyal to the President of the United States. And thus Senators like Jackson, Kennedy, Packwood and of course Boschwitz are not loyal citizens.

Then the slogan was sounded "We should not let the Jews determine the foreign policy of the United States." What was the meaning of this slogan? The Greek minority in the U.S. did much to determine the Senate decision to withhold weapons from Turkey after it invaded Cyprus. No one will frighten the great and free Jewish community of the U.S., no one will succeed in cowing them with anti-Semitic propaganda. They will stand by our side. This is the land of their forefathers - and they have a right and a duty to support it.

Some say we must "rescind" the law passed by the Knesset. "To rescind" is a concept from the days of the Inquisition. Our forefathers went to the stake rather than "rescind" their faith.

We are not going to the stake. Thank God. We have enough strength to defend our independence and to defend our rights.

If it were up to me (alone) I would say we should not rescind the law. But as far as I can judge there is in fact no one on earth who can persuade the Knesset to rescind the law which it passed by a two-thirds majority.

Mr. Weinberger - and later Mr. Haig - said that the law adversely affects UN Resolution 242. Whoever says that has either not read the Resolution or has forgotten it, or has not understood it.

The essence of the Resolution is negotiation to determine agreed and recognized borders. Syria has announced that it will not conduct negotiations with us, that it does not and will not recognize us - and thus removed from Resolution 242 its essence. How, therefore, could we adversely affect 242?

As regards the future, please be kind enough to inform the Secretary of State that the Golan Heights Law will remain valid. There is no force on earth that can bring about its rescission.

As for the contention that we surprised you, the truth is that we did not want to embarrass you. We knew your difficulties. You come to Riyadh and Damascus. It was President Reagan who said that Mr. Begin was right - that had Israel told the U.S. about the law (in advance) the U.S. would have said no. We did not want you to say no - and then go ahead and apply Israeli law to the Golan Heights.

Our intention was not to embarrass you.

As regards Lebanon, I have asked that the Secretary of State be informed that we will not attack, but if we are attacked, we will counterattack.