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First Strike: Menachem Begin and the Osirak Nuclear Reactor

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Course Description:

In 1981, Israel launched a daring strike on the Iraqi nuclear reactor in Osirak. The successful attack was lauded by Israelis but condemned by the international community, including the Reagan administration. The next day, Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin ran a remarkable press conference in which he defended the preventative strike, invoking both morals and Jewish history. In this seminar, we'll explore his arguments and the controversies over preemptive and preventative warfare.

Guiding Questions:

1. What are Begin's arguments for why the Osirak attack was justified?
2. Much of the world condemned Israel's actions. Why do you think they thought it was so wrong?
3. Begin asserts that this was not a "suicide mission" for the pilots. Suppose, however, that the Air Force thought it was unlikely that the pilots would have returned alive after the strike. Do you think Israel should have still launched the attack?

“The Osirak Nuclear Reactor”

Menachem Begin

9 June 1981

28. Press Conference with Prime Minister Begin, I.D.F. Chief of Staff Eitan, I.A.F. Commander Ivri and Director of Military Intelligence Saguy, 9 June 1981.

In view of the massive criticism from world leaders and adverse public opinion abroad, the Prime Minister and the senior military leaders of Israel responsible for the operation again explained at length the reasons that led Israel to destroy the Tammuz 1 plant using American-made aircraft and flying over Saudi and Jordanian territory. Mr. Begin argued that the operation was "literally a life saving one" All efforts to persuade France to withdraw from the Iraqi

nuclear project failed and there was no other way. Israel was now proclaiming a new defense doctrine - it would not tolerate the acquisition of nuclear weapons by any Arab state or allow the Arabs to develop nuclear capacity. Text:

Mr. Begin: Ladies and gentlemen of the press: despite all the condemnations which were heaped on Israel for the last twenty-four hours, Israel has nothing to apologize for. Ours is a just cause, we stand by it, and it will triumph. Saddam Hussein, the ruler of Iraq, who, with his own hands, killed his best friends in order to become the sole ruler of that country, had an ambition: he wanted to develop nuclear weapons, so that he can either try to bring Israel to her knees on behalf of the Arab world, or to destroy her menfolk and infrastructure and the great part of her army which consists of reservists in the cities. In other words, he wanted to destroy our existence - in fact, our people and our country. Some people ask where are the proofs for that thesis. I will bring you today only one short quotation out of many:

In the newspaper "Al Thawra", on 4 October 1980, the following statement was made: "The Iranian people should not fear the Iraqi nuclear reactor, which is not intended to be used against Iran, but against the Zionist enemy. "Well what does it mean "to be used against"? Should that reactor be for peaceful purposes, let me say for electricity, how can electricity be used against anybody - whether Iranians or Israelis? But if it is said "It is not going to be used against you, the Iranians, it is going to be used against the Zionist enemy," it means that there, will be something there which can be used against, obviously - in other words, an atomic bomb. We have had reliable information from the most reliable sources, that either in July this year, or at latest in September, the nuclear reactor "Ossiraq" is going to be operational and "hot." The Iraqis even the last few days before our operation took place, pressed the French experts to do whatever they can to quicken the pace in order to make it possible for them to turn the reactor into an operational one in July, in other words less than two weeks from today. If that had happened, we couldn't do anything whatsoever in order to prevent the Iraqi tyrant from developing at least in the near future, between three and five Hiroshima-type nuclear bombs of 20 kilotons - and there's experienced proof during the Second World War that a bomb of 20 kilotons caused at least 200,000 casualties, in killed and in afflicted, the afflictions being for several generations, and as everybody read the story of those afflictions, I do not have to repeat it. With 3 such bombs, which Iraq could have developed in that reactor, out of 60 kilograms of enriched uranium, or out of 21 kilograms of plutonium, they could have destroyed completely, utterly, the Dan district: the basis of our industrial, commercial, agricultural and cultural life. 600,000 casualties we would suffer, which would mean in the United States, 44 million casualties, in terms of Egypt over 8 million casualties. Where is the country which would tolerate such a danger knocking at its door? We have a special reason to guard our people: a million and a half of our children were poisoned by a gas called Zyklon B. There is no difference between poisons. Radioactivity is also a poison, and there was a direct danger that hundreds of thousands of our little children may be poisoned by that radioactivity as a result of using even three Hiroshima-type bombs which Saddam Hussein had an ambition to create in order to try to destroy our country and our people. If that happens, if the reactor had become operational - and as the specialists use the word, "hot" - we couldn't do anything forever. Because if it were "hot," and we would open it by bombs from planes, then a horrifying wave of radioactivity would come out from the reactor and cover the sky over Baghdad, and then in Baghdad hundreds of thousands of innocent citizens - residents, men, women and children - would have been hurt. I for one would have never made such a proposal to my colleagues under such circumstances, to send our air force and bomb the reactor, and I believe with all my heart, that none of my colleagues either in the government or in the army would have ever made such a proposal or would have ever accepted such a proposal, under these circumstances to send out our planes and bomb the reactor - because we wouldn't wish under any

circumstances to hurt the masses of the residents of Baghdad. They are innocent people. They belong to the enemy's camp, but as people they're untouchable, and these are our ethics and always have been, and we have told others to fight a proper fight, but armed men against armed men. Never use your arms against innocent, unarmed civilians - and if there is a danger of those civilians being hurt, warn them beforehand, before the operation, or do whatever you can to avoid such civilian casualties. Since we started fighting for the liberation of our people, these are our ethics. We proved them in deeds, not in words. I was happy to hear that in northern Lebanon both the Christians and the Moslems reached an agreement as a result of which they promised each other not to shell civilians. That is the way, and so Major Haddad promised me he will not shell civilians as he did once in Sidon, when five of his soldiers got killed. Now this is the reason, I again explain, why we couldn't do anything after July this year, or latest September. So we faced a terrible dilemma: Should we now be passive, and then lose the last opportunity without those horrible casualties amongst the Baghdad population. To destroy that hotbed of death which is called the "Ossiraq" reactor, and then not be able to make it unoperational any more or forever - or should we act now, for reasons I do not have to explain. For simple logic we decided to act now before it is too late - so that we will not allow a bloodthirsty enemy who marches on Abadan and declares that this is the beginning of his march on Jerusalem and to Jaffa. Look at the map: he marches to the east and he declares that he is going to march to the west. Probably backwards. But trying to capture Abadan, he thinks of Jerusalem and of Jaffa. What a hostility - and that same man says it is not turned against Iranians, it will be against the Zionist enemy. Therefore we choose this moment: Now, not later, later may be too late, perhaps forever. And then we will stand by idly: Two, three years, at the most four years, and Saddam Hussein would have produced his three, four, five bombs, what should, what could we have done in the face of such a present, direct, horrifying peril? Nothing. Then this country, and this people, would have been lost, after the Holocaust. Another Holocaust would have happened in the history of the Jewish people. Never again, never again. Tell so your friends, tell anybody you will meet, we shall defend our people with all the means at our disposal. We shall not allow any enemy to develop weapons of mass destruction turned against us. I hope that in the days to come all men and women of good will, wherever they live, will understand our motives: it was an act of supreme, legitimate self-defense. And in vain do they seek in the capital of our ally and friend the United States, reasons to complain that we perhaps misused the weapons we got from the United States. They were given to us for the purpose of self-defense. I would like to repeat my statement: And in this case it was an act of supreme, a morally supreme act of national self-defense. No fault whatsoever on our side. if there will be a debate, we shall clarify every point.

I mentioned during my statement, Egypt. I would like to explain to you why. In the morning, I sent a private letter to President Sadat, as I sent yesterday evening a letter to President Reagan, explaining to President Sadat as well what were our motives in acting when we decided to send our pilots against that Iraqi reactor called "Ossiraq". I hope the president of Egypt will understand. I just explained in simple words the danger, the necessity and the action. I am sure that President Reagan, who got my letter yesterday, will understand fully our motives.

Now, ladies and gentlemen, let me conclude my introductory remarks with a word of praise for our soldiers, for our fighting men, for our chief-of-staff, for the commander of the air force, for the head of our Army intelligence, and for our pilots. Lieut.-General Eitan, Maj.-General Ivri, Major-General Saguy will agree with me, if I send from here our greetings and expressions of our gratitude above all to our pilots. I don't think that since Dunkirk, since Winston Churchill used his famous saying, about the many who owe so much to the few - that saying applies more today to our pilots - the few ones who went out, covered the distances of more than 1,800 kms., without any possibility

of forced landing - all over enemy territory, in order to carry out the mission, and the target was surrounded by anti-aircraft guns, by land-to-air missiles and by fighter-planes, and yet they went there, into the lions' den, in order to defend their people. God bless them all.

Q: Mr. Prime Minister, is it true that the mission was postponed three times before it was carried out?

A: It was postponed several times, that is true. Whether three, or two, or four, that is not a matter for public discussion. Several times it was postponed.

Q: Mr. Prime Minister, is it true that the pilots were told they may be going on a suicide mission?

A: Not at all...we do not educate our pilots to become kamikazes. They should live. They have families.

Q: Mr. Prime Minister, does the Israeli raid signal a new Israeli policy that says that Israel will not tolerate for any Arab country, any Arab enemy, to construct nuclear weapons against Israel?

A: I didn't say so. I said that Israel will not tolerate any enemy - not any.

Arab country - any enemy, to develop weapons of mass destruction against the people of Israel. These weapons were against the people of Israel. These weapons were of mass destruction. And therefore we destroyed the reactor which was supposed to produce them. That is no new policy whatsoever. We must guard with all the means at our disposal these remnants of the Jewish people. I hope you now understand what I said.

Q: Mr. Prime Minister, the State Department has condemned the Israeli action. What is your reaction to the State Department's two comments made yesterday in Washington?

A: I don't want to go into an open debate with the State Department of the United States, because I remember the Secretary of State being here, and he said when he asked a certain question, that amongst friends and allies, we do not openly debate problems. We do it discreetly and in a diplomatic way. And even if the State Department departed from that rule, I do not want to depart from it. But we are in contact with the Secretary of State. And I read the statement - especially the second statement made by the spokesman of the State Department - even before my letter reached President Reagan, and with the knowledge that my letter is on the way to President Reagan. I read that statement and we shall undertake steps to make it clear, in a diplomatic way, to the State Department what we think about the statement. I

Q: And you feel, sir, that the letter to President Reagan will convince him of the correctness of the Israeli action?

A: I explained to President Reagan the Israeli operation. The motives. Why we did it. Why it had to be done. I believe that the President will understand.

Q: General Ivri, what can you tell us about the operational details, such as the number of aircraft, the type of aircraft, the route, and any particular special problems you had along the way?

A: We used a number of types of planes ... including F-15's and F-16's, among others, that participated in the operation. The route is, of course, secret - we will not describe the route. That is all I can answer.

Q: General Ivri, can you confirm that a new type of bomb was used in this raid?

A: The answer is negative. The bombs were ordinary. The execution was what was good. The operation technique of the crews is what made the difference.

Q: General Ivri, can you give us some of the ideas of the difficulties that had to be faced, and can you tell us how long the pilots trained for this mission?

A: We carried out very many exercises and training procedures. Over the course of very many months. Using different kinds of planes. We had to provide answers for a number of basic problems: one was the problem of range, or the radius of the action, problems of fuel, problems of communication with the target, or intelligence control, and monitoring in far-off areas. Planning had to overcome these difficulties. We made several models and plans...over the course of time, we found the most appropriate methods, we developed means that were attached to the planes, technical means and others, and this brought us to a plan of action. It is difficult to estimate the amount of time...but we have been practicing the last method for about six months. The execution was carried out exactly according to plan, so it is difficult to point to difficulties. I can also say that the debriefing after the operation was relatively boring. Since everything went according to plan...

Q: Mr. Prime Minister, the Iraqis have already indicated today that they intend to rebuild the nuclear reactor. If that happens, what will be Israel's response?

A: Well. According to the estimates by the specialists, when they will have that reactor rebuilt, I will not be here any more - so I can not give you an answer to that question. You will have to get in touch with me, but in a different place. And then perhaps I will be able to answer. But what I can tell you as a human being, I believe that should the Iraqis try again to build the reactor, through which they can produce atomic weapons. Israel will use the possibilities at its disposal to destroy that reactor.

Q: And will that apply also to Libya?

A: Well, let us deal first with that "meshuggenah" Saddam Hussein - with the other "meshuggenah" we shall deal another time.

Q, Mr. Prime Minister. Many countries have condemned Israel's raid on the reactor. Do you think these condemnations reflect the true feelings of these various countries, or do you suspect that many quietly are quite pleased with Israel's actions?

A: My friend, your question is based on a very weak assumption. Not everybody condemned Israel. To the contrary. I got today a number of cables from abroad, mainly from the United States, but also from Europe, that I have never got for many years - with congratulations, with expressions of admiration for our pilots. I believe that the nations are with us. And if for various reasons which I do not want to go into, several governments condemn us, and they may repeat it at the Security Council - well my friends, what can we do? We are an ancient people, we are used to it. We survived. We shall survive - and a condemnation, if it is unjust, can be condemned.

Q: General Ivri, I would like to know how you would compare the difficulty of an operation designed to knock out the Syrian missiles in Lebanon to the difficulty of the operation carried out on Sunday. My second question is, had the United States' sale of the "AWACS" to Saudi Arabia already gone through, would this have seriously complicated Sunday's operation?

A: As to the first question, as we say in simple language. It is difficult to compare a tomato to a cucumber. They are two different things that I would not at all like to compare. The major point is that this operation we have already carried out successfully - and as far as the second one is

concerned, it is still before us. And the Bible says (I Kings 20:11): "Let not he who girds on his sword boast like he who ungirds it."

As to the second question, "AWACS" can influence things when they are in the right place at the right time, there is no doubt..

Lt. Gen. Eitan: If the Syrians had the "AWACS" two days ago, they would have detected us even before take-off.

Q: Mr. Prime Minister, can you tell me why Israel has never ratified the nuclear non-proliferation treaty? And also, Ambassador Blum at the United Nations proposed a nuclear free zone in the Middle East. If that came into being, would Israel allow its nuclear facilities to be open to inspection?

A: Well, Israel made already long-ago a declaration to the effect that it will

never be the first to introduce nuclear weapons into the region of the Middle East. We stand by it. Insofar as the non-proliferation treaty is concerned, we said we are prepared to sign it, but there must be the following conditions fulfilled: that the Arab countries around us make peace with us. If they refuse to recognize us, if they refuse to make peace with us, what is the point of signing such a treaty? So the position of Israel is as follows: we shall not be the first to introduce nuclear weapons into the Middle East - as far as the non-proliferation treaty is concerned, we ask our neighbors first of all to sign with us peace treaties. Make with us peace.

Q: And sir, this question about the nuclear free zone, if such a thing ever came to pass, would Israel allow its facilities to be...

A: Well, it applies to the idea of a free zone. It's a good idea. But sometimes people speak about a free zone in the Far-East, or sometimes in Eastern Europe, sometimes in the Middle East. Let me tell you that as far as my experience - and I am an old man - goes, Shakespeare would say "words, words." We want deeds, deeds, deeds...

Q: Mr. Prime Minister. Two questions: How long ago did this plan become operational? The second question is, would you publicly advise France and Italy not to contribute any more efforts to the rebuilding of the reactor?

A: We asked them yesterday. I didn't mention the names of the countries. Perhaps you did. There are two European countries which gave full assistance to Iraq to build that reactor and make it possible for the Iraqis to produce atomic weapons. I appeal to these two anonymous countries, of which almost every child knows what are their names, that they should desist from this horrible, inhuman act. I do hope that my appeal at least reached the capitals of those anonymous countries. Do you know them?

If you know, spell the names out. Yes, we already did it in the official communique. I can repeat it again. It is shameful, may I say now, in full candor, that two European countries, ancient, civilized, but also which saw with their own eyes what happened to the Jewish people, and those particular countries should remember our tragedy perhaps - except one additional - more than any others, should help to develop a bloodthirsty arch-enemy of the Jewish state weapons of mass destruction. It is shameful, and they should be ashamed, instead of calling in our ambassador and castigating him because of our operation. Because of their actions they should be ashamed and we shall call in their ambassadors and teach them some lessons in international ethics, as it is due to them.

Q: Major General Saguy ... perhaps you could tell us sir, to what extent did Israel's military intelligence make a contribution to the preparation of this operation, and now that the operation has been completed, and now that we know the results were as expected, and it should not be necessary for a long, long time for another operation to be carried out in that direction, perhaps you can go into some detail as to what your branch of the armed forces, and perhaps including some who do not wear the uniform, did to make this operation possible?

A: You assume, of course, that I won't detail what they did exactly. But I can tell you that any good plan is based on correct data, and we supplied the correct data.

Q: General Saguy, France now says that Friday is the day that the technicians take off, and not Sunday. If I'm not mistaken that forty technicians were inside and that one was killed. Was there an intelligence failure?

A: Maybe the failure is in France. But in the final analysis, the fact that a number of planes that dropped a number of tons of bombs on a very specific target, and caused a grand total of a maximum of three killed in this operation - that doesn't exactly testify to failure.

Q: In the government statement it was said that the mission was carried out on Sunday specifically because no French technicians would be working. Can you explain this difference please?

A: The chances were, according to our analysis of the information we had, that on Sunday, statistically, much fewer foreign Christians are found on the premises than on any other work day.

Q: General Eitan, could you tell us whether the attacking aircraft were detected at any point on their way to the targets (and) whether at the target or at any other point, they were fired upon by any defensive guns?

A: It is quite possible that they were detected while crossing the border, where they crossed, and apparently there was some sporadic anti-aircraft fire in the region of the target - not from missile batteries.

26. Statement by the Government of Israel on the Bombing of the Iraqi Nuclear Facility near Baghdad, 8 June 1981.

On 7 June 1981 Israeli planes bombed and destroyed the Iraqi nuclear facility called Tammuz 1 south of Baghdad In the following government statement, the reasons for this unprecedented operation were enumerated, among them information that the Iraqi reactor would be operational between July and September 1981, and Israel could not permit such a development to endanger its security and possibly its very existence. Text:

On Sunday, 7 June, the Israeli air force launched a raid on the atomic reactor "Osirak," near Baghdad. Our pilots carried out their mission fully. The reactor was destroyed. All our aircraft returned safely to base.

The Government feels duty-bound to explain to enlightened public opinion why it took this decision.

For a long time, we have been watching with growing concern the construction of the atomic reactor "Osirak." From sources whose reliability is beyond any doubt, we learn that this reactor, despite its camouflage, is designed to produce atomic bombs. The target for such bombs would be Israel. This was clearly announced by the ruler of Iraq. After the Iranians had inflicted slight damage

on the reactor, Saddam Hussein stressed that the Iranians had attacked the target in vain, since it was being constructed against Israel alone. The atomic bombs which that reactor was capable of producing whether from enriched uranium or from plutonium, would be of the Hiroshima size. Thus a mortal danger to the people of Israel progressively arose.

Again, from most reliable sources we learned of two dates when the reactor would be completed and put into operation. One: the beginning of July 1981; Two: the beginning of September 1981. In other words, within a short period of time, the Iraqi reactor would have been operational and "hot". Under such circumstances no government of Israel could contemplate bombing the reactor. Such an attack would have brought about a massive radioactive lethal fallout over the city of Baghdad and tens of thousands of its innocent residents would have been hurt. We would thus have been compelled to passively observe the process of the production of atomic bombs in Iraq, whose ruling tyrant would not hesitate to launch them against Israeli cities, the centers of its population. Therefore, the government of Israel decided to act without further delay to ensure our people's existence. The planning was exact. The operation was timed for Sunday on the assumption that the 100-150 foreign experts employed at the reactor would be absent on the Christian day of rest. This assumption proved to have been correct. No foreign experts were hurt.

Two European governments, in return for oil, have assisted the Iraqi tyrant in the construction of atomic weapons. We again call upon them to desist from this horrifying, inhuman deed. Under no circumstances will we allow an enemy to develop weapons of mass destruction against our people.

We shall defend the citizens of Israel in time, and with all the means at our disposal.