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REPORT DATED 15 DECEMBER 1955 BY THE CHIEF OF STAFF OF
THE UNITED NATIONS TRUCE SUPERVISION ORGANIZATION TO THE
SECRETARY-GENERAL OF THE UNITED NATIONS ON THE LAKE TIBERIAS
INCIDENT OF THE NIGHT OF 11-12 DECEMBER 1955

1. I have the honour to report (a) on the operations carried out by Israel armed forces within Syrian territory on the East Shore of Lake Tiberias, between El Buteiha and El Koursi, on the night of 11/12 December 1955 and, (b) on the background of tension between the two countries.

I

2. A Syrian complaint against the Israeli attack has been received by the Chairman of the Israeli-Syrian Mixed Armistice Commission. The Syrian delegation has requested that its complaint be placed on the agenda of the next formal meeting (French: réunion officielle) of the Mixed Armistice Commission. For the reasons stated in paragraphs 20 and following of my report of 6 January 1955 (S/3343), there has been no formal meeting of the Israel-Syrian Mixed Armistice Commission, except emergency meetings, since 20 June 1951. The Syrian delegation has not requested an emergency meeting.

3. United Nations Military Observers attached to the Mixed Armistice Commission visited the area of the attack on 12 December. The area in question extends from Buteiha Farm (IR 2083 2554) in the North to the border of the Demilitarized Zone in the South (about 11 kilometres).

4. This report is based on the investigations made on the spot by United Nations Military Observers and on the statements they have taken from Syrian witnesses. Since the Mixed Armistice Commission has not considered the Observers' reports, more importance has been attached to what the Observers have seen than to what they have heard from witnesses.

5. Though the Israeli operation should be considered as a whole, it has, for clarity's sake, been divided into separate parts, beginning with the operation

in the area of Buteiha Farm in the North and ending with the operation in the South.

6. Buteiha Farm: On 11 December, at about 2000 GMT, an Israeli armed force estimated at company strength crossed the Demarcation Line into Syrian territory and launched simultaneous attacks against a Syrian Army post in the vicinity of Buteiha Farm (MR 2083 2554) and against Buteiha Farm itself. The evidence gathered indicates that the Israeli operation apparently was carried out as follows:

(a) At about 2000 hours GMT, one part of the Israeli force, approaching across Lake Tiberias in two boats of unidentified design, landed in the vicinity of Baab Zakiya (MR 2085 2552). Simultaneously, the second part of the Israeli force apparently crossed the Jordan River at a point north of the Syrian Army post. The first group advanced to positions about 300 metres northeast of Buteiha Farm. The second group moved to positions about 200 metres east of the Syrian Army post. Both groups attacked their objectives simultaneously. When the group attacking Buteiha Farm had accomplished its mission, these troops moved along the shoreline of Lake Tiberias and joined the attack against the Syrian positions. With the mission at this objective completed, the combined Israeli forces evacuated the area sometime between 0130 and 0300 hours GMT, 12 December 1955, by fording the Jordan River near its mouth. The Israeli troops boarded fifteen to twenty trucks marshalled in the vicinity of Usheh (MR 2063 2556) and withdrew to the West.

(b) The entire operation in the Buteiha area was preceded by Israeli mortar fire from the vicinity of MR 2064 2556 and machine-gun fire from Israeli positions in the vicinity of MR 2067 2564 and MR 2068 2569 and additional machine-gun support originating from two boats of unidentified design that took positions on Lake Tiberias at about MR 2075 2552. All fire apparently was directed against the Syrian position, pinning down the Syrian troops manning the post while the Israeli forces moved into attack positions. This fire was lifted when the Israeli troops stormed their objectives.

(c) During the course of the Israeli attack, the thirty-five Syrian troops manning the post in the Buteiha area suffered the following casualties:

<u>Dead</u>	<u>Wounded</u>	<u>Missing</u>
2 Sergeants 1 Corporal 6 Soldiers	1 Soldier	3 Soldiers

One civilian was also killed during the action. His body was found near the east bank of the Jordan River at a point several hundred metres north of the Syrian Army Post.

(d) During the course of their attack, the Israeli troops destroyed by demolition charges or burning the following buildings, equipment, and supplies at the Syrian Army position and Buteiha Farm:

Syrian Army Post - by demolition

5 concrete, steel reinforced bunkers
1 40mm anti-tank gun

Syrian Army Post - by fire

1 wood and corrugated metal platoon size barracks and fittings
3 tents with cots, blankets, and personal effects
1 commander's hut with bed, blankets, and effects

Buteiha Farm - by demolition

1 large house belonging to farm owner
1 supply store-room (later burned by fire of undetermined origin)
1 truck of about 1-1/2 ton capacity (which also caught fire)

In addition, the kitchen hut near the Army post and rooms in the outbuildings on the farm had been entered and ransacked with considerable damage to personal effects and furnishings.

(e) Physical evidence found in the attack area indicated the Israeli force was armed with automatic weapons, rifles, pistols, hand and rifle grenades, and demolition charges. The Israeli attack against the Buteiha area seemed to have been well co-ordinated with the attacks of other Israeli troops who struck at other points along the northeastern shore of Lake Tiberias in almost simultaneous operations.

The operations carried out by the Israeli army in the South extended from the Syrian post close to the Demilitarized Zone (MR 2118 2480) to Ed Douga (MR 2106 2520).

(a) At Post MR 2118 2460 which dominates the barbed wire fence marking the Demilitarized Zone, a Syrian soldier was killed and all the buildings were blown up. A Syrian witness told the United Nations observers that the post had been attacked from behind by an infantry unit, while armoured vehicles were driving north along the shore of Lake Tiberias in the direction of Koursi. The United Nations observers saw tracks of eight or ten vehicles on the beach.

(b) In the Koursi position (MR 2106 2481) all the concrete works were blown up and the ammunition dumps emptied by the attackers. One Syrian officer and ten other ranks were killed. In the post situated 50 metres west of the Koursi position four soldiers were killed, the ammunition dump was blown up and an anti-tank gun taken away in the direction of the Israel settlement of Ein Gev in the Demilitarized Zone. At Post MR 2115 2468 to the East of the Koursi position two soldiers were killed and all the concrete works were blown up. At Post MR 2122 2478 one Syrian officer and 3 other ranks were killed. All the concrete works were blown up and the tents burned.

(c) Bared: At Bared (MR 2105 2849) which consists of a small group of civilian houses, two women and one policeman were killed, one girl was wounded. A Syrian witness reported that he saw six Israeli armoured vehicles driving along the shore and 20 to 25 boats along the beach.

(d) At Douga (Kafer Aageb) eight soldiers, six policemen and one woman were killed, five civilians were wounded. The main concrete building of the military position (MR 2106 2520) and several houses in the village were blown up.

(e) Apart from the operations against the Syrian positions close to Lake Tiberias, a small Israeli party apparently struck East. At about 3 kilometres west of Sqoufiye (MR 2145 2458) United Nations observers noticed tracks of about 12 men leading to and from a general south-west direction. They also saw ammunition with Israeli markings and large stains of what appeared to be blood. They were told that a Syrian reconnaissance patrol had been caught by surprise and had lost one officer and 6 other ranks.

8. On 12 December, at 0355 GMT the Senior Israel Delegate to the Mixed Armistice Commission informed the Chairman that the Israeli forces had returned to their base. He also complained that the Syrian army had shelled the Israel settlement of Ein Gev, in the Demilitarized Zone. The United Nations observer who visited Ein Gev on the morning of 12 December found six craters of probably exploded artillery shells. One crater was near a cowshed, the roof of which had been slightly damaged. There had been no casualties. The Secretary of the Israel settlement said it had first been shelled at about 2030 GMT approximately half an hour after shooting had started in the north. The settlement had again been shelled at about 0100 GMT when it returned fire with 81 mm mortar fire.
9. On the Syrian side the following casualties have been reported:
killed: 3 officers, 2 officer cadets (French "aspirants"), 36 other ranks, 7 policemen, 8 civilians (5 men and 3 women). Total: 56 killed. In addition, 9 Syrian soldiers were wounded and 32 missing.
10. On the Israel side, the Israel army has reported the following casualties:
killed 6; wounded 10.

II

11. In a statement issued on the night of 11 December, the Israel Foreign Ministry spokesman linked the attacks on the Syrian positions with the shelling of Israel fishing boats and their police escort on Lake Tiberias on 10 December. After referring to this "unprovoked attack", the spokesman stated: "To-night, Israel forces advanced against Syrian positions to silence the batteries responsible for this attack in order to avert further Syrian aggression and to ensure the security of Israel citizens engaged in their lawful occupations... Syrian batteries east of Lake Kinneret (Tiberias) have on repeated occasions attacked Israel fishing and police boats...".
12. Incidents connected with fishing in Lake Tiberias have from time to time increased the tension between Israel and Syria. Israel has resented Syrian interference with Israel fishing. Syria has resented the fact that inhabitants of Syria are no longer exercising the fishing rights which they enjoyed under the Anglo-French Agreement of 7 March 1923. Israel representatives have expressed their readiness to negotiate regarding the renewal of the Agreement. They have also suggested that individual Syrians be granted fishing permits, on personal

application to the Israel authorities. The Israel suggestions have not been accepted by Syria and Israel police have not only protected Israel fishermen, but prevented the inhabitants of Syria from fishing in the lake.

13. Either when they were escorting Israel fishermen or chasing Syrian fishing boats, the Israel police have from time to time been fired at from Syrian positions close to the shore of the lake. They have also fired at these Syrian positions. Israel and Syrian complaints have been lodged with the Mixed Armistice Commission in connexion with such shooting incidents. In most cases, both parties have submitted complaints in connexion with the same incident.

14. In a "Background paper on Fishing in the Lake of Galilee", issued by the Press Office of the Israel Government on 11 December 1955, it is stated that "in the first six months of 1954 alone, Israel casualties on the Lake were two killed and seven wounded. During the first ten months of 1955, there occurred at least twenty-five incidents on the Lake following the opening of fire by Syrian outposts on Israel fishermen and police launches, causing loss of life and property."

15. According to the records of the Israel-Syrian Mixed Armistice Commission for the first six months of 1954 the casualties referred to by the Israel Press Office occurred on 15 March and 30 June 1954, when Israel policemen were killed or wounded during exchanges of fire with Syrian positions. The resolutions adopted in emergency meetings by the Mixed Armistice Commission blamed both parties for their part in the two incidents and did not state which party started firing. Apart from the Israel complaints relating to the 15 March and 30 June incidents, there were during the first six months of 1954, two other Israel complaints alleging firing at Israel boats on the Lake. In one case, the Israel delegation did not request an investigation of its complaint. In the other case an emergency meeting of the Mixed Armistice Commission was held. The Mixed Armistice Commission blamed both parties for their part in the incident.

16. During the same period (first six months of 1954) the Syrian casualties were two soldiers wounded by fire from Israeli boats on 11 March; one woman killed and two soldiers wounded on 15 March by Israel artillery which had joined Israel boats in an exchange of fire with El Douqa. As indicated above the Mixed Armistice Commission divided responsibility between Israel and Syria for these shooting incidents.

17. The division of responsibility for shooting incidents in which Israel boats and Syrian positions are implied is not only due to the difficulty of determining which side fired first. In an exchange of fire, each side violates the G.A.A. by firing across the Armistice Demarcation Line, which in that area runs along the international boundary between Syria and Palestine (Cf. map attached to the General Armistice Agreement). The boundary follows a line on the shore parallel to and at ten metres from the edge of the Lake. (On the difficulties which have arisen in connexion with that ten metre strip and the resolution adopted by the MAC on 15 March 1954, see my report of 6 January 1955 (S/3343, paras. 43 and following)).

18. During the first six months of 1954 to which the Israel Press Office has referred the MAC considered that Israel was violating the G.A.A. by using armoured landing craft (LCV type) armed with machine guns and cannon as police boats in the Eastern part of Lake Tiberias. That part of the Lake is a "Defensive Area" in which the G.A.A. allows no "naval force" (Article V, para. 6 of the General Armistice Agreement and Annex IV, Section III to the General Armistice Agreement).

19. The condemnation of the use of naval force by Israel in the Defensive Area was discussed by the Israel Chief of Staff and me in September 1954. It was agreed that the characteristics of a police boat should be: (a) that it should be manned exclusively by policemen; (b) that it should be clearly designed and armed for police functions. The Israel Chief of Staff suggested that the ramp of the landing craft used as police boats be welded, so that it could not be opened. I made the point that the armament should in no case exceed one-half inch in calibre. Two crafts were modified as agreed.

20. The statement of the Israel Press Office (see para. 14) referred also to the first ten months of 1955, during which "there occurred at least 25 incidents on the Lake following the opening of fire by Syrian outposts on Israel fishermen and police launches causing loss of life and property". According to the records of the Israel-Syrian MAC, the Israel Delegation, during that period, submitted twenty-two complaints alleging firing from Syrian positions. In none of them did they request an emergency meeting or an investigation or indicate that there were Israelis killed or wounded.

21. In most cases, according to the Israel complaints, firing by Syrian positions was directed not at Israel fishing craft but at Israel police boats. These boats whether they escort fishing craft or not often cruise close to the shore, preventing the inhabitants of Syria from crossing the ten metre strip to fish in or use the waters of the Lake. Such cruising has been considered provocative by nearby Syrian positions and there have been from time to time exchanges of fire.

22. The Chairman of the Israel-Syrian MAC, in order to prevent incidents during the fishing season wrote to the Senior Syrian Delegate on 2 November 1955 to inform him that in the Koursi area, about 60 Israelis would fish permanently between the middle of November and the middle of April, especially at night. They would in certain places get as close as 200 metres from the shore. In the Buteiha area, the fishing season would last from Mid-November to June. During that period about 60 Israelis would fish especially at night between the mouth of the Jordan and the mouth of Wadi Massadiya. This information had been given by the Senior Israel Delegate and the Chairman requested that in order to avoid regrettable mistakes it should be passed on to all Syrian echelons concerned.

23. The Senior Syrian Delegate acted on the information received from the Chairman. No Israel fishing boat has been fired at since the beginning of the fishing season. The 10 December incident, which was followed by the violent retaliatory action against the Syrian positions on the night of 11/12 December was again an incident between Israel craft other than fishing boats and a Syrian position.

24. The first complaint received about the 10 December incident was a Syrian verbal complaint received by the Chairman on the morning of 11 December. It was followed by a Syrian written complaint received on the morning of 12 December. An Israel verbal complaint made on the morning of 12 December was followed by a written complaint received on 13 December. As in previous complaints, each Party alleged that the other had opened fire. According to the Syrian complaint, at about 14.20 GMT two Israel launches stopped at approximately MR 2800 2540 and for 20 minutes fired with automatic weapons at Buteiha Farm and Douqa Village. According to the Israel complaint small arms and bazooka fire was opened from MR 2105 2520 at an Israel police boat on routine patrol at MR 2104 2520. The fire lasted for 15 minutes. The Israel boat was hit by bullets and a bazooka shell. The fire was returned.

25. There were no Israel or Syrian casualties during the incident and neither Party requested an emergency meeting of the MAC. On 12 December, a United Nations observer interrogated the second in command of an Israel police boat and visited the boat. The boat was one of the police boats of LCA type converted to carry three turrets carrying a 7.92 mm machine gun each. It had been hit at about 2 feet above the water line by a bazooka of approximately 3.5 inch caliber. It had also been hit by a burst of machine gun fire. According to the Israeli officer, the boat was fired at on 10 December when it passed El Douqa, and was about 70 metres from the shore.

III

26. The incidents of Syrian shooting at Israeli boats on Lake Tiberias which the spokesman of the Israel Ministry for Foreign Affairs gave as the reason for the retaliatory action on the night of 11/12 December would hardly appear to be its sole cause, when viewed against the background of the general relations between the Parties. Their differences in regard to the Demilitarized Zone and the resulting practical paralysis of the MAC machinery are set forth in my report to the Security Council dated 6 January 1955, (S/3343).

27. Relations between the Parties were more seriously embittered by their failure to agree to an exchange of prisoners during the current year. Israel public opinion was extremely agitated over the fate of the four soldiers taken prisoner on the 8th of December 1954, when carrying out an intelligence operation in Syrian territory, as set forth in the resolution of the Israeli-Syrian MAC adopted on the proposal of the Syrian Delegation on 12 January 1955 (Appendix I). There was originally a fifth prisoner, who committed suicide on the evening of the 12th of January, when in prison. Investigation disclosed no signs of physical ill-treatment nor any evident reason why he should have taken his life. Subsequent to this, the prisoners have been regularly visited by UNMOs and their treatment has been in accordance with the Geneva Convention.

28. The course of the prolonged negotiations to secure the release of these four Israeli prisoners was interrupted by the incident of 22 October 1955, during which Israeli military raiding parties killed three, wounded six and captured five Syrian military personnel. The press release I issued after this incident is annexed to this report (Appendix II). It may be noted in this connexion that the MAC has not considered the United Nations Observers' report on the

investigation of this grave incident, since Syria has not requested an emergency meeting. Syria, like Israel, has for several months, filed complaints "for the next formal meeting of the MAC". On 9 December 1955 there were thus outstanding for the next formal meeting 568 Syrian and 401 Israel complaints. The fact that, after "formal meetings" which fell into disuse in June 1951, "emergency meetings" are no longer resorted to (the last one took place in March 1955) indicates the extent to which the traditional MAC procedure of formal discussion has broken down. It has been replaced with more or less success by informal conversations and also unfortunately, when an incident occurs, by unilateral statements the object or result of which is to inflame public opinion.

29. The Israel action on the night of 11/12 December was a deliberate violation of the provisions of the General Armistice Agreement, including those relating to the Demilitarized Zone, which was crossed by the Israel forces which entered Syria.

30. ~~Like the Tibya~~ Like the Tibya and Gaza incidents with which the Security Council has had to deal, the Tiberias incident has been explained by Israel as a retaliatory action on a large scale. In these three cases Israel forces have acted by surprise, and, after striking a heavy blow, they have returned to their base. There is, however, a risk in such retaliatory action, viz., that the attackers may not be able to limit the extent of the operation to that planned. Such actions may well produce a violent reaction by the forces of the attacked country and what had been conceived as a limited raid develops into full-scale hostilities. In the present atmosphere of tension and military activity, this possibility must be faced.

31. There is a striking disparity between the scale of the retaliation and the provocation which was cited by the Israeli Government (see paragraph 11 and following). Other factors which may have been operative in the decision to retaliate are given in paragraphs 26 and 27. It is also to be noted that these factors may not have been related strictly to issues outstanding between Israel and Syria.

32. In view of the above-mentioned factors, an attempt to find a solution to the problem by suggesting agreements which might be made and arrangements which might be effected within the scope of the Israeli-Syrian General Armistice Agreement, is probably not realistic. If there were a possibility that the two parties would cooperate in finding an "equitable and mutually satisfactory settlement" of their claims or complaints, as was hoped and intended at the time the Armistice Agreement was signed, the troubles in regard to fishing on Lake Tiberias could be readily settled.

33. The informal procedure indicated in paragraph 22 might however, if the parties agreed, help in preventing further incidents in the North Eastern area of Lake Tiberias. As stated in paragraph 23, the Syrian military, after being informed by the Chairman of the Mixed Armistice Commission of the Israeli plans for the present fishing season, which began about 15 November, have not interfered with Israel fishing boats. There might also be a kind of gentleman's agreement concerning Israel police boats. At an informal meeting between the Chairman of the Mixed Armistice Commission and the two Delegations, on 25 May 1953, the Senior Israel Delegate stated that the police boat which was then patrolling in Lake Tiberias would remain at least 150 metres from the shore. On 1 December 1954, at an informal meeting between the Chairman and the General Staff Officer in charge of the Israel Delegations to the Mixed Armistice Commission, the latter stated that there was no reason why the police boats should not be kept at a reasonable distance from the shore. The Israel right to send police boats to patrol anywhere in Lake Tiberias would in no way be impaired by a new gentleman's agreement to keep them at a certain distance from the shore. Similarly, the Israel right to the 10 metres strip along the shore should not be affected by letting inhabitants of Syria water their cattle in or draw water from the Lake.

The Syrian authorities could also, without impairing their legal position in the matter, authorize individuals residing in Syria to apply for fishing permits issued by the Israel authorities.

34. An early exchange of prisoners, carried out in conformity with the Geneva Convention would also help in relieving tension. Moreover, as long as the General Armistice Agreement is in force, both parties should endeavour to apply its clauses. As has been pointed out in paragraph 28, the Mixed Armistice Commission is not operating and cannot operate unless the parties will agree to forego unilateral interpretations of its powers and to make use of the clause for the interpretation of the meaning of the provisions of the General Armistice Agreement set forth in Article VII, paragraph 8. In present circumstances, the alternative to the use of force, which should be strongly condemned, is the implementation of the General Armistice Agreement, supplemented, if possible, as suggested above, by gentleman's agreements, arrived at within the framework of the Armistice Agreement and in its spirit.

APPENDIX I

HEADQUARTERS TRUCE SUPERVISION ORGANIZATION

Jerusalem, 13 January 1955

The Israel-Syrian Mixed Armistice Commission at an emergency meeting held on 12 January 1955 adopted the following resolutions:

A. The first resolution voted upon was tabled by the Syrian Delegation and adopted. It states:

"The Mixed Armistice Commission

Having examined the Syrian complaint No. 265 of 12 December 1954, concerning the serious incident of 8/9 December 1954, in the course of which an Israeli patrol armed with sub-machine guns and grenades, and equipped with knives, a rope, telephone pole spikes, 3 pieces of rubber, 2 field glasses and a compass was captured in Syrian territory by a Syrian military patrol, decides:

1. The penetration of the Israeli patrol into Syrian territory, with the obvious aim admitted by the patrol itself, to work on a booby trap listening post connected by the Israelis with the Syrian telephone lines is a hostile act flagrantly violating paras. 2 and 3 of Article III and para. 2 of Article IV of the GAA.
2. Hold the Israeli authorities responsible for the above-mentioned serious violations.
3. Requests the Israeli authorities to take appropriate vigorous measures to avoid in future grave penetrations of this kind, committed in violation of the provisions of the GAA.
4. Calls upon the Syrian authorities to apply to the captured Israeli patrol the provisions of the Geneva Convention of 12 August 1949 on the treatment of prisoners of war."

The Syrian Delegation voted for, the Israel Delegation against, and the Chairman for.

B. The second resolution was tabled by the Israeli Delegation and adopted. It states:

"The Israel-Syrian Mixed Armistice Commission

Having considered the incident of 8 December 1954:

"1. FINDS that on 8 December 1954 an Israeli military patrol consisting of the following 5 soldiers was captured by the Syrian Army:

- (1) Lieutenant Meir MOZES
- (2) Sgt. Meir YAAKOBI
- (3) Private Uri ILAN
- (4) Private Yeacov LIND
- (5) Private Gad KASTELANETZ

2. TAKES NOTE of paragraph 4 of the operative part of the resolution it adopted on 12 January 1955 on the same incident and taking into account the Geneva Convention relative to the treatment of prisoners of war referred to in Article VI of the GAA, calls upon the Syrian authorities to release and return the above five soldiers to the Israeli Delegation through the MAC at the earliest date."

The Israeli Delegation voted for, the Syrian Delegation abstained and the Chairman voted for.

Explaining his vote, the Chairman made the following comment:

"The reports of investigation have established without a doubt that the five Israeli prisoners are soldiers who were acting under orders at the time of the incident. Notwithstanding the responsibility of the authority who ordered these soldiers, I consider that they themselves were not responsible for the violation of the armistice agreement which their mission has created. In other words, I consider that the responsibility should be on the Party and not on the soldiers."

APPENDIX II

Jerusalem, 23 October 1955

The Chairman of the Israel-Syrian Mixed Armistice Commission has reported to the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization Headquarters that preliminary investigation indicates that a well-planned operation was carried out across the Syrian border in the vicinity of Aalmine, last night between 2040 and 2230.

At least two groups, twenty or thirty strong, took part in the action during which three Syrian vehicles were burned.

Bits of equipment and ammunition found in the area of the attack have Israeli markings and traces of blood lead in the direction of the Israel border.

According to Syrian reports, one officer and two soldiers were killed, six soldiers wounded, one officer and five soldiers missing.

The Chief of Staff, UNTSO recalls that the Security Council has strongly condemned a policy of retaliation the consequences of which are here so tragically illustrated.
