

Nasser and the Six Day War, 5 June 1967: A Premeditated Strategy or An Inexorable Drift to War?

MOSHE GAT

INTRODUCTION

On the morning of 5 June 1967, the Israeli air force launched a surprise attack against the airfields of neighbours Egypt and Syria. Two hours later, the two Arab air forces lay in ruins. The attack was preceded by several tense and nerve-racking weeks in which the Egyptian and Israeli armies eyed each other nervously across the border. The reason: almost a month earlier, in May 1967, Egyptian President Nasser had embarked upon a series of steps, which, remarkably, elicited no substantive Israeli response. On 14 May 1967, Nasser sent the first of what were to be several hundred Egyptian soldiers into the Sinai Peninsula. Two days later, on 16 May, he demanded and obtained the withdrawal of the United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF) from Egyptian soil. Finally, on the night of 22–23 May, Nasser declared the Straits of Tiran closed to Israeli shipping. From that point onwards, the Egyptian president's speeches became increasingly violent. He demanded the restoration of the Palestinian people's rights, which, he thundered, had been usurped by the cursed Zionist state. He also began to exalt in the impending destruction of Israel. Yet, increasingly aggressive statements apart, Nasser failed to declare war on Israel, content to admit that he would welcome a war should the Zionist state choose to start one.

In talks held with United Nations Secretary-General U Thant, Soviet Prime Minister Aleksei Kosygin, and various Americans officials, Nasser insisted that he had no intention of going to war against Israel. Indeed, over the years, Nasser had declared, on more than one occasion, that Egypt would under no circumstances be drawn into an untimely war with Israel. Only when it had acquired sufficient power to quash the hated Zionist enemy would Egypt, Nasser avowed, go to war. This, and the fact that 50,000 Egyptian soldiers were still bogged down in the mire of the Yemen

Moshe Gat is Head of the General History Department and Professor of Political Studies at Bar-Ilan University.

Israel Affairs, Vol.11, No.4, October 2005, pp.608–635

ISSN 1353-7121 print/ISSN 1743-9086 online

DOI: 10.1080/13537120500233714 © 2005 Taylor & Francis

civil war, tended to substantiate his May 1967 claim that he had no plans or desire for a military confrontation with Israel. If this was the case, then what lay behind Nasser's decision to concentrate his forces in the Sinai Peninsula?

One possible answer is that Nasser was engaged in a disingenuous political manoeuvre intended to score a political victory over Israel similar to the one achieved in the Suez conflict, but, this time, without recourse to war. In other words, Nasser sought to trick his way to success. According to this school of thought, Nasser's actions were intended to reap vast political dividends. Its adherents point to the nature of the Egyptian deployment in the Sinai and its military preparations as clear proof that Nasser was seeking to highlight his military power and potential for political ends. Nasser, they claim, hoped that a massive show of strength would enable him to achieve a political victory and so underpin and strengthen his waning pan-Arab credentials.¹

The attendant publicity surrounding the entry of the Egyptian forces would, Nasser believed, yield huge political and psychological returns, and confirm, once and for all, his, and Egypt's, leadership of the Arab world.² A second school of thought, while agreeing that Nasser never intended to go to war, has argued that he decided to send his troops to the Sinai Peninsula, a step which they admit was in retrospect the first along the road to war, solely in order to deter Israel from attacking Syria. Mohammed Heikal, editor of the highly influential *Al Abram* and Nasser's confidant, insists that the Egyptian president's action was 'a purely defensive move designed to draw off Israeli forces', and that 'no offensive operations against Israel were envisaged'. Nasser, he claims, was convinced 'that the presence of Egyptian forces in the Sinai would deter the Israelis from attacking Syria'.³ Others take a slightly different tack. They concede that Nasser's initial intention was to deter Israel, but have argued that this objective changed almost immediately and that, encouraged by the lack of an Israeli response, Nasser sought to exploit the deepening crisis in order to reverse the situation in the southern Negev and Eilat, though again without recourse to war. They too point to the character of the Egyptian deployment which, they maintain, clearly confirms their contention.⁴

In order to strengthen their case both schools of thought have stressed that in 1967 it would have been utterly unrealistic, if not sheer madness, for Egypt to go to war with Israel. Five years of fighting in the Yemen had left the Egyptian army exhausted, its ranks seriously depleted and much of its military equipment worn out or damaged beyond repair. The Egyptian army was, they stress, ill-prepared and ill-equipped to challenge, let alone defeat, the well-supplied and well-trained Israeli Defence Forces (IDF).⁵ Moreover, Nasser himself did not think very highly of his army's fighting capabilities. Nasser had always preferred a weak and highly politicized army preoccupied with in-fighting that would pose little or no threat to his

regime. All this is confirmed by various senior Egyptian army officers, including General Abdul Ghani al-Gamasi, Egypt's chief of staff following the 1973 October War. Egypt, they emphasize, was at the time totally unready for war. Nasser's decision to send Egyptian forces into Sinai was a political one, which the armed forces were unable to execute.⁶ It is worth noting that Yitzak Rabin, the Israeli chief of staff in 1967, endorsed this view in full. In Rabin's opinion, Nasser, by sending his troops into the Sinai, had merely wanted to improve his increasingly shaky position in the Arab world and prove, at little risk, that he, and he alone, could challenge Israel. Unfortunately, according to Rabin, Nasser failed to anticipate how things would develop.⁷

The Israeli scholar, Shlomo Aronson, has taken a completely different view, arguing that there was no connection between Nasser's decision to return to the Sinai and the events on the Israeli-Syrian border. According to Aronson, Nasser, having received information that Israel was on the verge of manufacturing an atomic bomb, felt compelled to take action in order to prevent Israel from succeeding in its nuclear designs. Aronson bases his argument on a conversation which took place between Nasser and the American ambassador to Cairo, Richard Nolte, in which Nasser warned that Egypt would launch a pre-emptive strike the moment it had proof that Israel was on the brink of producing a nuclear device.⁸

This was nothing new; Nasser had been making similar threats ever since 1960, when reports had begun to trickle through that Israeli was constructing a nuclear plant in Dimona. In 1966, once the news of the plant's existence was confirmed, Nasser warned, both in the press and electronic media, that if Egypt had even the slightest reason to believe that Israel was on the verge of manufacturing atomic weapons it would launch a pre-emptive attack. Moreover, Aronson points out that on 17 May and again on 26 May 1967 Nasser ordered air reconnaissance flights over the nuclear plant in Dimona, clear evidence of the seriousness of his threat. Accordingly, Aronson concludes that Nasser's decision to send forces into the Sinai was designed from the very beginning to bring about a military confrontation. Nasser, he contends, was not swept forward by events, or acting ad hoc, but following a well thought out, premeditated plan.

The following article examines Nasser's policy during the May–June crisis of 1967. It will seek to determine whether Nasser's decision to send troops into the Sinai Peninsula, in broad daylight, was intended purely as an act of deterrence? It will consider whether Nasser, given his declared policy of not being drawn into an untimely conflict with Israel, reflected upon the possible dangers resulting from his decision to send Egyptian forces into the Sinai. It will ascertain whether Nasser really had proof positive that Israel was on the verge of manufacturing an atomic bomb and whether this influenced his course of action? Finally, it will contemplate the possibility that the decision to re-enter the Sinai was in fact part of

a preconceived plan, and that Nasser simply exploited Israel's recent threats against Syria in order to put it into action. In order to answer these questions, and provide a full and satisfying account of Nasser's behaviour in May 1967, it is first necessary to outline the Egyptian president's policy in the ten years that had elapsed since the end of the Suez campaign.

NASSER'S STRATEGY

The Sinai campaign of October–November 1956, and its outcome, signalled a period of relative calm in Arab–Israeli relations. After the war, the United States not only acknowledged Israel's security requirements, but was willing to come to some kind of an arrangement with the Israeli government in order to meet those needs. Accordingly, the United States assured Israel that it considered the Gulf of Aqaba and the Straits of Tiran international waterways. It insisted that no country had the right to deny ships free and innocent passage through either the Gulf or the Straits. It further promised to see to it that the two would remain open to Israeli shipping. To this end the United States undertook to procure, in tandem with other concerned countries, a general recognition of the principle of free passage through the Straits. It also acknowledged that, should international action, whether carried out under the auspices of the United Nations or some other international coalition, fail to secure the opening of the Straits, Israel had every right to defend itself against any violation of the principle of free access. Britain endorsed the American position in full, as did an even more emphatic France.⁹ The United Nations, too, played its part in meeting Israel's security requirements. In February 1957, the General Assembly voted to station an Emergency Force along the Straits of Tiran and in the Gaza Strip. The UNEF's task was twofold: to ensure that Egypt observed the principle of free passage through the Straits and to prevent terrorists infiltrating Israel from Egyptian territory.

These decisions apart, Israeli leaders, in order to leave no doubt as to Israel's response should Nasser decide to close the Straits to Israeli shipping, repeatedly emphasized that Israel would regard any interference with the principle of free passage as an act of aggression. They warned that Israel would take action to defend its right to sail through the Straits even at the cost of war. Closing the Straits, the Israeli government concluded, amounted to a *casus belli*.¹⁰

Nasser, on his part, utterly rejected the principle of free passage through the Straits. He denounced the decision to station troops on Egyptian territory as an outrageous and monstrous insult. By doing so, the Egyptian president argued, the General Assembly had simply rewarded Israel's gross aggression. Yet, at present, Egypt, as Nasser well knew, had little choice but to submit to the United Nations' decision. But Nasser vowed that one day, once Egypt had acquired sufficient political and military strength, he

would overturn this obscene act of aggression, expel the United Nations force from Egyptian soil and close the Straits to Israeli shipping.¹¹

The Straits issue was only one of several problems which afflicted Egyptian-Israeli relations. Egypt, indeed the entire Arab world, regarded the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 as one of the most heinous crimes in history.¹² Nor had they ever hidden their intention to crush the Jewish state, wiping it off the face of the earth. But speeches and declarations, however aggressive, would not, Nasser knew, bring about the destruction of the 'Zionist entity'. If the Arab states wanted to achieve this they would have to go to war, and this, according to Nasser, demanded careful planning and preparation.

The humiliating defeat of 1948 was, he pointed out, the result of lax and inadequate preparations. Consequently, before going to war for the third and, hopefully, final time, the Arab nations must first, Nasser exhorted, modernize their armies and stockpile a considerable amount of up-to-date and sophisticated weapons systems. In sum, the Arab world must acquire sufficient fire-power to be able to launch a war and destroy Israel before interfering busybodies could intervene and prevent them from fulfilling their plans.¹³

But even had the Arab states been tempted to ignore Nasser's advice and go to war with Israel, the latter's military power was sufficient to dissuade them from taking such reckless and foolhardy action.¹⁴ In military terms, Israel was the Middle East's most powerful state. Since 1957 Israel's military deterrent had emerged as a key factor in maintaining the region's precarious stability. The Western powers were convinced that it was essential that Israel maintain its relative military strength for the region's stability to be preserved. To this end, they were willing to sell Israel tanks, submarines, aircraft and other military equipment. According to Britain's prime minister, Harold Macmillan, by supplying Israel with arms Britain was doing no more than helping to preserve and consolidate the region's stability.¹⁵

Events within the Arab world also contributed to the Middle East's continuing stability. In September 1962, a group of radical pro-Nasser officers in Yemen overthrew the conservative regime of King al-Imam Badr and proclaimed the Arab Republic of Yemen. Al-Imam Badr, having narrowly escaped his would-be assassins, promptly declared war on the new regime, thus leading Yemen into civil war.¹⁶ Nasser naturally took the side of the revolutionaries. A friendly, pro-Nasser regime in Yemen, subject to Egyptian influence, would, he believed, act as the vanguard of a revolutionary wave that would sweep through the Arab world, shattering in the process the reactionary regimes of Saudi Arabia, Jordan and the Oil Emirates of the Gulf. This in turn would, as an extra added bonus, also bring an end to Britain's pernicious presence in the Middle East. In order to ensure the revolutionary regime's survival and the fulfilment of his vision,

Nasser decided, in October 1962, to send an expeditionary force, numbering several thousand men, to assist the Yemeni rebels. Yet as the years passed Nasser was forced to send more men and more equipment to Yemen. By May 1967, and with no victory in sight, there were 70,000 Egyptian soldiers fighting in Yemen.¹⁷ The Yemen civil war proved to be a bloody and expensive quagmire, drawing in and tying down a major portion of Egypt's army.¹⁸

Egypt's intervention in the Yemen civil war also served to widen the fissures in an already deeply divided and strife-ridden Arab world. The traditional and conservative Arab regimes, like Jordan and Saudi Arabia, and the 'progressive' Arab states of Egypt, Syria and Iraq had long been immersed in a bitter and violent conflict. Nasser, the self-appointed standard bearer of the 'progressive' Arab states, took a leading role in this struggle, constantly promoting the cause of revolution. In Yemen, with Saudi Arabia and Jordan supporting King al Imam Badr and Nasser the rebels, the civil war became one more, albeit brutal, expression of this ongoing and fierce battle between the two Arab camps.

Israel was delighted with Nasser's entanglement in Yemen. The Yemen civil war, like all inter-Arab conflicts had had the beneficial effect of pushing the Arab-Israeli conflict to the bottom of Egypt's agenda. Hence Nasser's refusal to be drawn into a war against Israel despite the fact that the situation along the Israeli-Syrian border was becoming uglier by the day. Indeed, as Abba Eban noted, Nasser's involvement in the Yemen war had 'a useful hampering effect on UAR [Egyptian] ambition'.¹⁹ As long as the Egyptian army was bogged down in the morass of the Yemen civil war, the chances of war, Israel concluded, were minimal.²⁰

In 1959, the water dispute burst onto the Middle Eastern stage, threatening to shatter the fragile stability which had characterized the region over the previous two years. Egypt's policy throughout the affair offers the most complete and thoroughgoing exposition of Nasser's strategy between 1957 and 1967. This dispute between Israel and the Arab states centred on the question of the right to exploit the waters of the Jordan River. The Jordan River is fed by three rivers: the Hasbani in Lebanon, the Banias in Syria, and the Dan, which runs through both Syria and Israel. The Jordan River itself flows along Israel's eastern boundary, forming the 16-mile-long border between Israel and Jordan. After the Suez campaign, Israel was in desperate need of water to build new settlements, absorb future immigrants and redistribute its current population in a more rational manner. Ideally, it would have preferred to have reached some kind of agreement with its neighbours regarding the use of the river's waters. But no agreement was forthcoming. This being the case, Israel decided to exploit the Jordan River's waters with or without the Arabs' consent.²¹ Accordingly, in September 1959 it began work on the National

Water Carrier, which was to channel water from the Jordan River southwards to the Negev Desert.

As news that the Israelis were busy laying down pipes to carry water from the Jordan River to the Negev began to filter through, the Arab world erupted in a frenzy of violent rage. They denounced the Israeli diversion as an act of overt aggression. It was, they bewailed, a crime second only to the conquest of Arab Palestine in 1948.²² The diversion, they claimed, would allow Israel to absorb a vast number of Jewish immigrants - four million was the figure mentioned - thus enhancing its military, demographic and economic power. As a result, Israel would be tempted to further conquests at Arab expense.²³ There were also, according to the Arab states, humanitarian considerations to take into account. Increased Jewish immigration would diminish any chance that the Palestinian refugees might have of returning home, as their lands would be used to build settlements for the newly arrived immigrants. All in all, the Arab states claimed, the Israeli diversion scheme posed a tremendous threat to the Arab world's security and rights, so much so that it had every right to defend itself against this act of palpable aggression. But, other than making some very loud and very aggressive noises, the Arab states did little or nothing to frustrate Israel's water plans

At the end of 1963, Israel was busy working on the final stages of the National Water Carrier project. As a result, the calls within the Arab world for an uncompromising and aggressive response to the Israeli threat grew louder and uglier. Syria, the most extreme of the Arab states, demanded the destruction of the National Water Carrier, even at the cost of war. According to Syria, only violent and uncompromising action against the Israeli water diversion would defeat the project and prevent Israel from realizing its dream of a greater Israel.²⁴ Yet even Syria did not dare risk a military confrontation with Israel without Egypt's blessing and participation. Egypt, however, true to Nasser's strategy, would only fight if victory was assured, and at this stage it was, according to Nasser, most assuredly not.

The Egyptian president had no quarrel with Syria's assumption that once the National Water Carrier was operative, Israel, having acquired sufficient military strength and economic power, would be tempted into expanding further at Arab expense.²⁵ But he was not willing to risk a military confrontation with Israel while thousands of Egypt's soldiers were in Yemen enmeshed in a seemingly endless civil war. However, the Egyptian president was equally loath to see Egypt labelled as too weak and too cowardly to confront Israel. Something would have to be done. Nasser decided, therefore, to invite the heads of the Arab states to a summit conference in Cairo in order to discuss the crisis. He thus hoped not only to deflect any Arab criticisms of Egypt, but also to impose upon the Arab states both his immediate policies and long term strategy. He would use the

summit to prove that, at this point in time, a war against Israel was totally out of the question.²⁶

The Cairo summit took place between 13 and 17 January 1964. A seminal event in the history of the Arab world, it was totally dominated by the Egyptian president. Nasser told his fellow Arab rulers, in no uncertain terms, that there could be no military solution to the water dispute as that dispute could not be treated in isolation from the rest of the Arab-Israeli conflict. But war, Nasser admonished, was not a matter to be approached lightly and before the Arab states could even think of waging war on Israel they must first attain and secure Arab unity. They must also reform and expand their armies to the point where they were bigger, stronger and better than the IDF. Finally, they must ensure Israel's diplomatic isolation. As none of these preconditions were in place, the Arab states would have to challenge the Israeli water diversion by other means.²⁷

Nasser proved extremely persuasive. The Arab leaders, rather than opt for war, chose to tackle the problem of the Israeli diversion by non-military means. Adopting Nasser's suggestion to resurrect the old 1959 counter-diversion scheme, they set up the Authority for the Exploitation of the Jordan River and its Headwaters. The Authority was charged with drawing up plans to divert the Jordan River, at source, thus preventing Israel from exploiting the river for its own ends. The Cairo summit was followed by a second Arab summit, on 5–11 September. The Alexandria summit ordered Lebanon, Jordan and Syria to start immediately on the counter-diversion scheme's technical groundwork.²⁸

The Alexandria summit's decision to push forward the counter-diversion scheme had two immediate results. First, Syria began to put into action its plans to divert the Baniyas. Second, Israel was resolved to stop, at any cost, the counter-diversion scheme's implementation. The Israeli government had stated, time and again, that it would regard any attempt to prevent it from taking its fair share of the Jordan River's water as tantamount to an attack on its borders. It warned that if the Arab states insisted on pushing through their foolhardy scheme to counter-divert the River Jordan, Israel would take whatever action was necessary to foil their plans, even if it meant a military confrontation.²⁹

The Israeli government decided that the best way to put an end to the Arab counter-division scheme was to destroy the counter-diversion equipment. Accordingly, once Syria began to work Israel proceeded to demolish its engineering equipment. On 13 November 1964, for example, Israel launched a massive air strike against the Syrian counter-diversion sites, wrecking Syria's engineering equipment.³⁰

This air strike offered clear evidence of the water dispute's explosive potential. Until then Israel had deliberately refrained from using its air force in border clashes with its neighbours for fear of escalating the

conflict, possibly to the point of war. Now, following the attack, Syria, undeterred, was demanding that the Arab states assemble a strong air fleet capable of intervening and neutralizing Israel's air superiority. It also insisted that all Israeli military actions be met with a blistering response. Finally, it called on Egypt specifically to expel the United Nations Emergency Force from Sinai and the Gaza Strip, replacing it with Egyptian troops. Hoping to goad Egypt into action, Syria accused it of cowering behind the United Nations' skirts.³¹

Nasser, unmoved by the Syrian taunts, stuck steadfastly to his policy of avoiding a confrontation with Israel until he was ready. He was not, he chided the Syrians, willing to go to war at a time and place of Israel's choosing, merely because the IDF had destroyed one or two Syrian tractors.³² Thus, the Syrian government was forced to concede defeat as it could not hope to carry on with its counter-diversion scheme without Arab, and above all, Egyptian military support.

Nasser's refusal to come to Syria's aid amounted to an Israeli victory. The winning combination of Israeli resolve and military power had triumphed. In Israel, it reinforced the prevailing assumption that as long as Egypt was busy fighting in Yemen, Nasser would not dare risk a war with it. The Israeli government's, perhaps inevitable, conclusion was that in the current favourable military and strategic circumstances it should not shy away from adopting firm and aggressive policies, even force, in order to resolve this and the numerous other problems which beset Arab–Israeli relations.³³

On 12 August 1965 Israel once again attacked and destroyed the Syrian equipment. The attack removed any lingering doubts the Arabs might have had regarding Israel's policy towards counter-diversion and its determination to use force to resolve the water dispute. It also marked the end of the water dispute. But if this issue no longer dominated the Middle East's agenda, it left behind a dangerous legacy. Heralding the beginning of an ever-growing number of border clashes between Israel and its neighbours, it contributed greatly to the dynamics of the Arab–Israeli conflict. It also paved the way to the flowering of Al-Fatah under Syrian patronage

THE CONFLICT ESCALATES

Once it dawned upon the Syrian government that the counter-diversion scheme was bound to fail, as no Arab state was willing to risk fighting Israel over it, it decided to tackle the problem of the Zionist state by proxy. Adopting an indirect strategy, it began to nurture and support Palestinian guerrilla units, drawn primarily from Yasser Arafat's Palestinian Al-Fatah organization. Established in 1959, Al Fatah had a military arm known as Al Asifa (the storm) and in 1965 Al Asifa launched the first of a series of guerrilla raids designed to disrupt daily life in Israel. Not surprisingly,

Israel's water installations were one of Al Asifa's principal targets.³⁴ Syria regarded Al-Fatah as a means of advancing its struggle against the Zionist state. Nor did its strategy change when on 23 February 1966 the left-wing faction of the ruling Ba'ath party seized power in a bloody coup. The new regime, headed by a group of young army officers, was, if anything, more extreme than its predecessor. It fostered the ideology of a war for the liberation of Palestine, turning it virtually into a religion. At the centre of its creed stood the concept of the perpetual armed struggle, in which the Palestinians, acting as the vanguard of the Arab nation, would eventually draw the rest of the Arab world into a war with Israel.³⁵

Under Syrian patronage, Palestinian guerrilla units, from Lebanon and, above all, Jordan, with its large concentration of Palestinian refugees, began to infiltrate Israel on a daily basis. Nor did Syria limit itself simply to supporting Al-Fatah's guerrilla activity. The Syrian army, too, began to raid Israeli territory, with Syrian soldiers routinely firing upon Israeli farmers. Israel held the Ba'ath regime responsible for the guerrilla raids and condemned it as the driving force and inspiration behind the Palestinian guerrilla attacks.³⁶ Refusing to tolerate the Al-Fatah raids, Israel adopted a tough policy of its own, known as 'Reprisal Action'.

Despite the fairly robust Israeli reprisals the border incidents and guerrilla attacks mounted. The Israeli government now began to consider launching wide-scale retaliatory action against Syria. Egypt, on its part, seeking to deflect the prospective Israeli attack, decided to sign a defence agreement with Syria. According to the agreement, signed on 4 November 1966, an armed attack against either of the two signatories would be considered an armed attack against both. Moreover, once war erupted, the Syrian and Egyptian armies were to operate jointly under the command of the Egyptian chief of staff.

On the face of it, the Syrians had finally got Nasser to commit himself to aid them automatically, thus abandoning his long-term strategy. But, Nasser was neither myopic nor a dupe and before signing the agreement he had ensured that it contained a cleverly hidden loophole which would enable him, if necessary, to evade any obligation to come to Syria's assistance. According to the agreement, Syria and Egypt's security policies were to be the product of joint consultations. This meant that Egypt would come to Syria's aid, but only if the two had previously agreed their policies. In the absence of Egypt's express and prior agreement to all of Syria's actions, especially those which might lead to a conflagration, the agreement was null and void.³⁷ Nasser had, in fact, long been worried about the effects of Syria's unruly behaviour, and one of the reasons he had agreed to sign the agreement was precisely to prevent Syria, and its policy of promoting terrorism, from dragging Egypt into an ill-judged, ill-timed war against Israel.³⁸

Syria, however, took the opposite view. Secure in the knowledge that it had Egypt's guaranteed support it proceeded to set the Israeli-Syrian border ablaze. By the beginning of 1967, Israel had had enough. On 7 April 1967 it launched, in broad daylight, a massive air strike against Syrian targets. The Israeli air force first attacked and destroyed Syrian artillery batteries and then in the ensuing, and dramatic, air battle, the first between the two states, it shot down six Syrian MIGs, two of them over Damascus itself. The Israeli response was without precedent: in the course of the strike 130 Israeli aircraft had flown over the Syrian capital announcing their presence with ear-splitting supersonic booms.³⁹

The scale of the Israeli operation raised the level of violence in the Middle East to new and worrying heights. Worse, it signalled the possibility of further escalation in the future.⁴⁰ Moshe Dayan, the former Israeli chief of staff, for example, warned that the army was propelling Israel into war.⁴¹ The government, however, quite unrepentant, was delighted with the results of the operation. The air strike had proved a terrible humiliation for the Syrian Ba'ath regime. It had demonstrated, not least to the leadership in Damascus, the extent of Syria's vulnerability to Israeli air power. It also revealed the degree of Syria's isolation, as none of the Arab states, Egypt included, had come rushing to its aid.⁴² In fact, the air strike had been such an overwhelming and stunning demonstration of the Israeli air force's capabilities that the Israeli government assumed that none of the Arab states would, in the future, even consider challenging Israel.⁴³ Hence the boast of Yitzak Rabin, Israel's hawkish Chief of Staff, that Israel had the power and ability to deal with the Syrians in any way and at any time it chose.⁴⁴

Yet Syria, undaunted, kept up the border provocations as the number of guerrilla raids increased daily. Israel, unwilling to become the victim of incessant guerrilla attacks, threatened further and worse retaliation. On 11 May 1967, Prime Minister Eshkol warned 'that Israel may have to respond [to the Syrian provocations] on a much larger scale than that of 7 April'.⁴⁵ Other leading Israeli political and military figures followed suit. The most aggressive threat of all was made, purportedly, by Rabin. According to various unsubstantiated sources, the Israeli chief of staff spoke of 'carrying out a lightning attack on Syria, occupying Damascus, overthrowing the regime and returning home'.⁴⁶

Such sabre-rattling was widely seen as evidence that Israel was planning a second, even more extensive, military operation against Syria. Egypt, already under fire for not coming to Syria's assistance, could hardly ignore the Israeli threats if it wished to maintain its primary position in the Arab world. On 11 May it began to redeploy its forces in secret, though to what end was as yet unclear.⁴⁷ The mystery was soon resolved when three days later, on 14 May 1967, Egyptian troops marched triumphantly back into the Sinai Peninsula.

EGYPT RETURNS TO SINAI

On 14 May 1967 two Egyptian infantry divisions accompanied by 200 tanks began to move towards the Sinai Peninsula to join the single division already there. They were the first Egyptian troops to enter the Sinai and over the next few weeks soldiers would stream into the peninsula in ever growing numbers. The Egyptian press celebrated the occasion. But, at the same time, it insisted that the Egyptian move was a purely defensive measure designed to deter Israel from attacking Syria. The Egyptian government, the press explained, had received reports from a highly reliable source that Israel was on the verge of launching an offensive against Syria.⁴⁸ The highly reliable source was the Soviet Union, which on 13 May, without any evidence to uphold its claim, warned Nasser that Israel was amassing forces along its northern border in preparation for an attack on Syria.⁴⁹

This was patently untrue. Moreover, if Israel had wished to attack Syria, it would have simply mobilized its forces at short notice, something it could have easily done given its small size. It had no need for elaborate and dangerous preparations. But the Soviets, for reasons of their own, chose to ignore this fact, informing Nasser that Israel was concentrating some 11 to 13 divisions along the Syrian border. Nor was this the first time that the Soviets had raised this specific alarm. They had done so in May and October 1966, and now, after having time and again refused Israel's suggestion that Soviet ambassador Tchouvakhine go north and see for himself that there was absolutely no truth to their allegations, they did it once more. Why?

The Soviet Union was apparently genuinely afraid that Israel was about to attack its Syrian ally. After all, the 7 April air strike had provided frightening evidence of both Israel's determination and its military prowess. By passing along bogus information about Israeli military preparations, Moscow had hoped to galvanize Egypt into fulfilling its obligations under the Egyptian–Syrian Defence Agreement, which would, in turn, deter Israel from carrying out its offensive plans against Syria. What the Soviet Union failed to anticipate was Nasser's extraordinary response. Expecting him to make a few largely symbolic gestures, it did not anticipate him taking steps which would provoke a serious escalation of the Arab–Israeli conflict, an escalation that would end in war.⁵⁰

The Soviet Union had never intended to ignite a war between Israel and the Arab states, since it regarded open conflict between the two as containing the danger of a superpower confrontation. Yet by deliberately disseminating spurious information about the apparent concentration of Israeli forces, the Soviet Union was playing with fire and must, therefore, assume its share of the responsibility for what happened subsequently.

The Israeli government objected to, but was not unduly alarmed by, the reintroduction of Egyptian forces into Sinai. It did not think the Egyptian manoeuvre posed any particular threat, especially as it was still convinced that Egypt was neither willing nor able to wage war against it. The government assumed that Nasser was indulging in little more than a show of strength, a flexing of Egyptian muscles, as part of the war of nerves waged by both sides. According to Israeli military intelligence, the Egyptian action was a repeat performance of the 1960 'Operation Rotem', when Nasser, seeking to dissuade Israel from attacking Syria, had secretly ordered his army to enter Sinai.⁵¹ Nasser, it concluded, was doing the same thing now, only publicly and on a much larger scale. Nevertheless, the Israeli government did take one or two precautionary measures. In particular, it ordered the partial mobilization of its reserve force and sought to expedite the delivery of arms supplies.⁵²

Similarly, the United States also believed that Nasser's decision to send troops into the Sinai desert was essentially a political decision. It presumed that Nasser, who had for some time been under attack from conservative Arab countries like Saudi Arabia and Jordan for being too 'soft' on Israel, was seeking to re-establish his commanding position in the Arab world and restore his recently damaged prestige by posing as Syria's protector.⁵³ The British Foreign Office was of much the same opinion:

The Egyptian armed forces alert resulted from the Israel [*sic*] open warnings of further retaliation against Syria if terrorist attacks continued and the belief that this presaged an early large scale attack on Syria. Egyptian purpose would be partly deterrent ... To demonstrate to the Israelis that the U.A.R. (Egypt) would not stand aside this time ... i.e. to prepare for supporting action if Syria were attacked.⁵⁴

But the Foreign Office did admit that the Egyptian decision marked an escalation in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Accordingly, hoping to avoid war and maintain a stable Middle East, something that was high on the British agenda, Britain sought to join forces with the United States to try and prevent the onset of a series of dangerous confrontations in the Middle East.⁵⁵ But were these Israeli and Western assessments of Nasser's intentions correct?

Nasser, it should be noted, had access to a number of reports from sources no less, if not more, trustworthy than the Soviet Union, according to which Israel was definitely not concentrating forces along its northern border. In a memorandum to U Thant, the United Nations' Secretary General, General Odd Bull, Head of the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization, confirmed that there was absolutely no evidence that Israel was concentrating forces on either side of the Israeli-Syrian border. Lieutenant Commander L.P. Blasch, the American military attaché stationed in northern Israel, notified his superiors that he had seen no

unusual movement of Israeli forces. But most telling of all was the evidence of Mouhamad Fawzi, the Egyptian chief of staff. Following persistent Syrian complaints about the concentration of Israeli forces, Fawzi had been sent to Damascus to see whether there was any basis to the Syrian accusations. Upon his return, Fawzi reported directly to Nasser informing him that he saw no extraordinary military activity on Israel's part or any indication that Israel was amassing its forces along Syria's border.⁵⁶

Yet if Nasser was aware that there was no truth to the Soviet reports, why did he send his troops into the Sinai desert in broad daylight? And if, for argument's sake, his sole intention had been to deter Israel from attacking Syria, why did he, even after it became clear that Israel was not going to take action against Syria, not only refuse to withdraw from the Sinai but continue to dispatch forces into the desert in ever growing numbers?

The inescapable conclusion is that Nasser's decision to return to the Sinai was not intended to deter Israel from attacking Syria, but, as Aronson claims, part of a carefully calculated plan, designed to achieve a single and clear-cut strategic goal: war. But does it follow that Aronson was also correct in assuming that what triggered Nasser's decision and plan was the fact that he had received airtight information that Israel was on the verge of producing an atomic bomb?

There is little doubt that Nasser, as he had stated on numerous occasions, saw the Israeli bomb as a grave threat. He had also warned that an Israeli bomb was a legitimate reason for war and that Egypt would launch a pre-emptive strike if Israel came close to producing a nuclear device. Britain, certainly, took Nasser at his word. It presumed that 'if the Arabs really believed Israel to be on the point of developing nuclear weapons they might conceivably risk a try'.⁵⁷

Yet Nasser, it should be emphasized, had never on these occasions threatened Israel with total war. Rather, he talked of, as the British correctly noted,⁵⁸ some kind of limited action to destroy Israel's nuclear installations.⁵⁹ More significantly, there is no convincing evidence linking Egypt's decision to enter the Sinai Peninsula with Israel's nuclear programme. Throughout the crisis, from the moment that Egyptian forces set foot in the Sinai, on 14 May, until the outbreak of the Six Day War, on 5 June, none of the parties to the crisis raised the nuclear question even once. For example: on 23 May United Nations Secretary General U Thant flew to Egypt in an effort to defuse the crisis. His talks with Nasser revolved around the prospects of relieving the tension along the border and the possibility of returning to the *status quo ante*. At no point, however, did either of the two leaders touch upon the question of Israel's prospective bomb. Likewise, in all his dealings with the United States, Nasser consistently failed to mention the nuclear issue.

In the last week of May, in a last-ditch effort to ease the tension, the United States sent Charles Yost, a senior American diplomat and advisor to the State Department, and Robert Anderson, a former secretary to the treasury in the Eisenhower administration, to Egypt.⁶⁰ Yost met with Mahmoud Riad, the Egyptian foreign minister, while Anderson, who was on reasonably friendly terms with Nasser, talked with the Egyptian president himself. During their conversations with the two Americans, Riad and Nasser denounced Israel's aggression towards Syria and talked at length of the Palestinian refugee problem, but as to the Israeli bomb, not a word.⁶¹ Then, again, during the final days of the crisis Nasser saw fit to send President Johnson a note in which he recorded one by one Israel's sins. These included recent aggression against Syria and constant violations of the 1949 ceasefire agreements. The introduction of Egypt's troops into the Sinai Peninsula, Nasser explained to Johnson, was a precautionary measure designed to combat Israel's belligerent policies. Nasser also raised the question of the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people, rights usurped by the Israeli state. But he did not refer to, or even hint at, the imminent prospect of an Israeli bomb.⁶² Clearly, in May 1967 Israel's ability to manufacture nuclear weapons was not uppermost in Nasser's mind. That being the case, why then did Egypt order air reconnaissance flights over the nuclear plant in Dimona on 17 and 26 May? The answer is simple, the plant, like the Nahal Shorek Research Institute, was a strategic target to be bombed should hostilities erupt.

Nonetheless, Aronson was correct in maintaining that Nasser's decision to move into the Sinai Peninsula was essentially a strategic one. In May 1967, having reached the conclusion that the conditions were ripe to challenge and defeat Israel, the Egyptian president had finally embarked upon his long ambition to destroy the state of Israel. Had the purpose of stationing Egyptian forces in the Sinai been solely to deter Israel from attacking Syria, Nasser would have been more than satisfied with the Israeli response to his action. Israel was keenly aware of the furor it had created by its harsh threats against Syria. It had no interest in a general conflagration, and the Egyptian move gave it pause for thought. All talk of attacking Syria ceased. Instead, Israel expressed a willingness to reach an agreement, similar to that of February 1960, in order to prevent the crisis from spiralling out of control. But before Israel, or indeed the powers, had time to reflect seriously or react to the Egyptian move, Nasser upped the ante yet again.

On 16 May 1967, a mere two days after the entry of Egyptian forces into the Sinai, the Egyptian chief of staff, Mouhamad Fawzi, ordered Major-General Rikhye, commander of the United Nations Emergency Force, to recall the United Nations troops deployed along the Israeli-Egyptian border between Rafah and Eilat. Then, even before Major-General Rikhye had time to respond to Fawzi's demand, Egyptian soldiers

began stationing themselves along the Israeli border. Fawzi, it is worth noting, did not call for the evacuation of the entire Emergency Force, which numbered about 3,400 soldiers, from Egypt and the Gaza Strip.⁶³ Nasser was much too shrewd for that. He knew that to demand the withdrawal of the entire Emergency Force was to run the risk of an Israeli attack before the concentration of Egyptian forces in the Sinai desert was complete.

Rather, by demanding the evacuation of only part of UNEF, Nasser, in keeping with his cautious nature, sought to produce a carefully calculated and limited escalation. In line with this goal, Nasser justified his demand by claiming that he merely wished to protect United Nations soldiers, should hostilities erupt. In fact, it seems much more than likely that what Nasser really wanted was to refute the derisive Arab accusations that he was hiding behind the United Nations.⁶⁴ It was also, and more significantly, the first step along the road to fulfilling his 1957 vow to rid Egypt of the hated UNEF presence.

If Nasser had raised the stakes, United Nations Secretary-General U. Thant aggravated the situation even further. Thant regarded UNEF as a single, integrated force. Accordingly, and totally ignoring the fact that the Egyptian president had absolutely no right to issue orders to the United Nations, Thant told Nasser that while he could withdraw the entire force from Egypt, he could not order the evacuation of only a part of it.⁶⁵ With this all or nothing response, the secretary-general had, in effect, put the fate of the Emergency Force directly in the Egyptian president's hands. Nasser was thrilled and not surprisingly opted for the withdrawal of the entire Emergency Force. On 18 May, Mahmoud Riad invited the representatives of the countries which contributed soldiers to the Emergency Force to the Foreign Office and informed them that the Egyptian government had decided to terminate forthwith the presence of the Emergency Force in Egypt and the Gaza Strip.

As the UNEF began its evacuation of Egyptian territory, Egypt continued to pour troops into the Sinai. By 18 May it had a total of three infantry divisions and one armoured which together numbered some 70–80,000 soldiers, supported by 600 tanks, as well as numerous artillery and air force units stationed in the Sinai Peninsula. It was an unprecedented concentration of forces. Moreover, some of these units were stationed as close as 20 kilometres to the Israeli border. Israel, understandably, found all this extremely worrying. It grew even more nervous when Nasser kept on sending forces into the Sinai, even though he knew that the Soviet reports concerning the concentration of Israeli forces in the north had no basis in reality. Accordingly, in order to be prepared for any eventuality, including a three-front war, the Israeli government ordered the mobilization of its entire reserve force. It assumed that with the Egyptian and Israeli forces facing each other across the border, war was inevitable.⁶⁶

'It is war', an exasperated Eshkol exclaimed, 'it is war, I am telling you it is a war!'⁶⁷

The mobilization of its entire reserve force imposed a heavy economic and psychological burden on Israel. Its economy ground to a halt. Its population, believing itself to be under siege, suffered from a growing sense of isolation. Nor was it entirely mistaken. Israel found itself in the midst of a serious, even life-threatening, crisis without the support of the Western powers. In stark contrast to the Soviet Union's unequivocal support for the Arab states, none of the Western powers did anything to indicate that they stood behind Israel. They did not offer a single word of comfort or make the smallest gesture of support. As a result, Israeli policy-makers were momentarily overcome by a sense of helplessness and vulnerability. Israel was facing a grave crisis yet the Eshkol government, seemingly frozen with fear and indecision, appeared totally incapable of leading the country. Rabin, for one, was heard to complain bitterly that he was not receiving explicit instructions from the prime minister, who plainly had no clear-cut policy to deal with the situation.⁶⁸

CLOSING THE STRAITS

Israel suspected that having expelled the UNEF from Egyptian territory and having deployed its own forces in its place, it was only a matter of time before Egypt closed the Straits of Tiran to Israeli shipping. After all, Nasser had long been under fire from conservative Arab states for refusing to block the Straits. For the Arab states, and indeed for Nasser also, the replacement of the UNEF by Egyptian soldiers in Sharm el Sheik, which overlooked the Straits, had created a grotesque situation whereby the latter sat and watched Israeli and foreign ships carrying cargo to and from Israel with impunity.

Israel attached enormous importance to its right of free passage through the Straits of Tiran. The Straits provided sole access to Israel's southern port of Eilat. They thus afforded the quickest and least expensive way to trade and cultivate relations with the countries of Africa and Asia, as well as to transport oil from Iran. Not surprisingly, securing the principle of free passage had been considered one of the crowning achievements of the Sinai campaign, and one Israel would not give up lightly.⁶⁹ Israel left no doubt as to its position on the Straits. And, as noted earlier, Israel warned that closing the Straits amounted to a *casus belli*.⁷⁰

Despite the explosive situation in the Middle East, the world at large remained to all practical purposes inert and mostly impassive. The United Nations secretary-general, except for one largely unfruitful trip to Cairo on 23–24 May, remained mostly silent. Nor did the Western powers choose to take any action of consequence. The French, who, following the Algerian fiasco, were bent upon ending their special relationship with Israel and

renewing their ties with the Arab world, were careful to do nothing and say nothing that might excite Arab approbation.⁷¹

Britain and the United States, on the other hand, were sympathetic to Israel's plight. They were also anxious to prevent a general conflagration. Above all they were committed to preserving the principle of free passage through the Straits. Nevertheless, rather than take independent action to stop Nasser in his tracks, they elected to operate through an international framework. They would do everything, the British premier Harold Wilson promised the Israeli government, to 'promote and support international action through the United Nations to secure the passage' through the Straits waterway.⁷² Yet their chosen course of action had a minimal chance of success.

The Western powers were clearly shirking their commitment to maintain the principle of freedom of passage through the Straits. Their lukewarm response to events goes a long way towards explaining the moderate, temperate, even conciliatory tone Eshkol adopted in his speech to the Knesset on 22 May. Israel, Eshkol declared, had no desire to attack the Arab states. It had no wish to threaten their security, invade their land, or undermine their legitimate international rights. Nor, he stated, was there any truth to the rumour that Israel was concentrating its forces along the Syrian border. On the contrary, Israel, Eshkol declared, was more than ready to play its part in any effort to promote peace and stability in the Middle East. Tellingly, the Israeli premier made only one rather oblique reference in his speech to the situation in the Straits, speaking of the need to return to the *status quo* on both sides of the border. And, rather than warn Nasser point blank against closing the Straits, he chose to appeal to the powers to take action to maintain the right of free passage, a right, Eshkol reminded them, which applied to all states equally.⁷³

If Eshkol had hoped that his placatory speech would stop the crisis from spinning out of control, he was to be sorely disappointed. Eshkol believed that he had offered Nasser a creditable way out of the crisis. By pointing to the glaring contrast between Israel's ferocious threats to attack Syria pre-14 May, and Eshkol's manifestly placatory speech on 22 May, the Egyptian president could boast that he had, single-handedly, stopped Israel from attacking Syria. Eshkol had undoubtedly offered Nasser a wonderful opportunity to defuse the crisis, had he indeed wanted to do so. But, Nasser had his own, very different, agenda, and neither Eshkol's speech nor his success in expelling the UNEF from Egyptian soil could persuade him to abandon it. On the contrary, both events served only to strengthen Nasser's resolve to push ahead with his game plan. The Egyptian president regarded Eshkol's speech as proof positive that the Israeli prime minister was utterly spineless, a weak and second-rate leader. This was very encouraging especially when coupled with Israel's current international isolation,

confirmed by the fact that he, Nasser, had been able to get rid of the UNEF without any response by the Western powers.⁷⁴

On the night of 22–23 May, having waited patiently until the last of the Emergency Force had evacuated Sharm el Sheik, Nasser declared the Gulf of Aqaba closed to Israeli shipping and all ships carrying ‘strategic material’ to Israel. Nasser’s decision to close the Straits was part of a carefully calculated plan to move towards an open military confrontation with Israel. That this was indeed Nasser’s intention is evidenced by a speech he made on the morning of 22 May to officers stationed at the Egyptian Air Force base of Bir Gifgafa, in the Sinai Peninsula. ‘We are now’, Nasser declared, ‘on the verge of a confrontation with Israel’. But, he continued ‘unlike 1956, when Britain and France stood squarely behind Israel, Israel today hasn’t the support of even a single European country. And, while it is possible that the United States will stand by Israel, its support will be limited to political backing and supplying Israel with weapons and military equipment’. Thus Egypt’s return to Sharm el Sheik, was ‘proof of our sovereignty over the straits of Aqaba. The Straits of Tiran lie in our territorial waters and under no circumstances will we allow an Israeli flag to sail through the Straits’. ‘If’, he added ominously, ‘the Jews threaten us war? I say to them “Welcome”, we are ready for war!’⁷⁵

As this speech proves, Nasser knew very well that blocking the Straits of Tiran meant war. Israel had said this hundreds of times, and, as such, Nasser’s decision to close the Straits was no more and no less than a public declaration on his part that he had decided to go to war and that the time for the final showdown with Israel had come.⁷⁶

Nasser had never abandoned his long-time goal of destroying Israel, and his actions in May 1967 must be judged in light of this elementary fact. Every move he made, from the return of Egyptian forces to the Sinai, to the expulsion of the UNEF from Egyptian territory, and finally the closure of the Straits was designed to achieve this end. The reason: Nasser had at long last reached the conclusion that he had both the political support and military strength to defeat Israel. In the political realm, Nasser was satisfied that the West had largely abandoned Israel while he, by contrast, enjoyed the solid support of the Soviet Union. The Soviet Prime Minister Aleksie Kosygin had only recently assured Egypt that Moscow stood foursquare behind Egypt and would not allow any country to interfere in events until the situation in the Middle East reverted to that of 1956.⁷⁷

What is more, Moscow was as good as its word. During Security Council discussions on the Straits affair, the Soviet Union displayed a blatantly one-sided and pro-Egyptian stance. When on 29 May Britain and Canada tabled what was by all accounts a reasonable compromise solution to the crisis, a compromise, moreover, underwritten by U Thant, the Soviet Union promptly vetoed the British-Canadian proposal.⁷⁸ Not surprisingly Nasser assumed that should a conflagration erupt he could count on the

Soviet Union to counterbalance any political or military assistance Israel might receive from the United States. Not that he was too worried about the United States' involvement, as, based on past experience, he was convinced that the Americans were more likely to restrain than aid Israel, while Israel, for its part, would not dare to act without its patron's sanction.

More significantly, and contrary to the aforementioned statements made by various senior Egyptian officers, Nasser was confident that he could demolish Israel on the battlefield. His decision to close the Straits was based, in part, on the estimates of Field Marshall Abdul Hakim Amer, as well as other leading Egyptian military figures, of the Egyptian army's capabilities. Amer had personally assured Nasser that the Egyptian army could withstand not one but two Israeli offensives and still have enough fire-power to launch a successful counter-attack.⁷⁹ The Egyptian war minister, Shams al Din Badman, boasted that he could take care of the Israeli air force, even if the US Sixth Fleet intervened. Sudki Mahmoud, the head of the Egyptian air force, was immensely proud of Egypt's early air warning systems and air defences and was convinced that they were capable of detecting and annihilating any Israeli air offensive, no matter how large and no matter where it came from.⁸⁰

Nor was this mere braggadocio. Since 1963, Egypt had been busy amassing a mind-boggling amount of military equipment, with special emphasis on state of the art Soviet jets. Egypt's massive military arsenal and, above all, its large and modern air force was one of the reasons Nasser was so utterly confident that he could, at long last, defeat Israel on the battlefield. Soviet arms plus Soviet diplomatic backing raised Nasser's self-confidence to new and dizzying heights and played a key role in his decision to send the Egyptian forces into Sinai, expel the UNEF, close the Straits and go to war.⁸¹

After the Suez War, Nasser was conscious of Israel's superior military capabilities and, as part of his strategy of carefully preparing for the final showdown with the Jewish state, sought to gain a strategic military advantage or at least balance with Israel. Luckily for him the Soviet Union was more than happy to oblige and willingly supplied Egypt with all the arms and military equipment it wanted.⁸² The Soviet Union reckoned that arms deals were a very effective way to extend its influence in the Middle East. But an arms deal with Egypt had an extra attraction. Egypt could provide the Soviet Union with a much-needed port in the Mediterranean. From 1960 onwards, ever since Albania and Yugoslavia had refused it the use of their ports, the Soviet Union had been desperately searching for a port to use as a home base for its Mediterranean fleet. Egypt, interested in forging closer relations with the Soviet Union, was more than ready to open its ports to the Soviet navy.⁸³

In 1960, Egypt and the Soviet Union signed the first of a series of arms deals, which allowed, among other things, the Egyptian air force to replace its largely obsolescent British aircraft with modern Soviet MIG fighter jets. In 1956, on the eve of the Suez Campaign, the only Soviet aircraft in Egypt's possession were the relatively aged MIG-15 and Ilyushin-28. In 1957, it acquired several MIG-17. Three years later, it became the proud owner of the highly sophisticated MIG-19 and in May 1962 the first consignment of MIG-21s, considered the very cutting edge of Soviet aerospace technology, arrived in Egypt. By the end of 1964 Egypt owned approximately 50 MIG-21s. In addition to fighter jets, the Soviet Union also supplied Egypt with medium range bombers, including the Tupolev-16 and with the short range bomber, Ilyushin-28. In June 1963 the Soviet Union and Egypt signed their largest arms deal to date, to the tune of, according to one estimate, US\$500 million.⁸⁴

Whatever the precise sum, it was without doubt the most significant arms deal in the period prior to the Six Day War. The Soviet Union now began to equip Egypt with SA2 ground to air missiles, to be stationed around Egypt's airbases and other strategic sites. Egypt also received the advanced T-54B tank, a model used by the Soviet army itself. In 1965, the two countries concluded a US\$300 million deal, which further augmented Egypt's air and naval power. Soviet arms deliveries to Egypt continued at an accelerated pace. As a result, by June 1967 Egypt possessed close to 1,200 tanks and 500 aircraft, including over 120 MIG-21s. Nor was Egypt the only one to benefit from Soviet generosity. Syria acquired Soviet weapons, as did Iraq, though the latter also bought arms from the US. Jordan, by contrast, got most of its military equipment from Britain and the US.⁸⁵

Its accumulation of vast quantities of Soviet-made weapons, and, above all, the fact that it now owned a large number of state of the art fighter jets, raised Egyptian self-confidence to new and breathtaking heights. Nasser was often heard to boast that Egypt's Soviet-made aircraft were more than a match for anything Israel possessed. Moreover, not only was the Egyptian air force stronger than Israel's, but Israel, as the Egyptian president explained, no longer had the benefit of British and French air cover, and this also boosted Egyptian self-confidence.

The US embassy in Cairo reported that Nasser was thoroughly convinced that the Arab states were capable of crushing Israel on the battlefield. Moreover, the embassy's report continued, every Egyptian official the embassy had spoken to seemed to share this belief. This boundless sense of Egyptian power coupled with the conviction that Egypt was able to confront and vanquish Israel, the report concluded, has been present for some months.⁸⁶ Thus, there is little doubt that it was Nasser's growing self-assurance that triggered the events that led to the 1967 war.⁸⁷

Israel, as everyone knew, would never submit to the Straits' closure.⁸⁸ As far as the Israeli government was concerned, Nasser's decision was ample cause for war. Certainly, Israel's senior military officers, including its chief of staff, Yitzak Rabin, the head of Military Operations, Ezer Weizman, and the head of Military Intelligence, Aharon Yariv were clamouring for action. They warned Eshkol that if Israel failed to respond immediately to Nasser's move, it would lose its vital ability to deter the Arab states. Interpreting Israel's inaction as weakness, the Arab states would conclude that they could threaten Israel's security, even further. The issue, Rabin advised Eshkol, went way beyond the right of Israeli ships to sail freely through the Straits. What was at stake, he emphasized, was Israel's military credibility and its ability to act in self-defence.⁸⁹

Eshkol, without making light of the military's arguments, nevertheless rejected them. In his opinion it would be an even worse disaster if Israel took military action before securing the support of the US. The Johnson administration had warned Israel several times against acting hastily or, indeed, taking any kind of action without consulting with Washington. Moreover, following the closure of the Straits, it had enjoined Israel not to take unilateral action, but to wait 48 hours to allow the administration to assess the situation and come up with a solution to the crisis. Eshkol knew that were he to yield to the army's exhortations, Israel would find itself fighting a war alone and friendless. He also knew that in a military confrontation Israel would find itself in dire straits, politically and militarily, unless the US was there to counterbalance and neutralize the Soviet Union's support for the Arabs. This meant that before it did anything Israel had to alter Washington's profound opposition to military action.⁹⁰ The Cabinet Defence Committee agreed with Eshkol. While denouncing the closure of the Straits to Israeli shipping as an act of aggression, it agreed to delay its response for 48 hours.

The Israeli government's decision to postpone its response, U Thant's decision to go to Egypt on 23–24 May, and the American appeals for moderation and restraint, all offered the Egyptian president an opportunity to put an end to the rush to war. But Nasser, intractable and implacable as ever, had no desire or intention to ease the tension or end the crisis. On the contrary, both before and after U-Thant's visit, Nasser made his position unambiguously clear. 1967, he declared, was not 1956. Not only did Egypt welcome a war, but the forthcoming battle would be waged with only one aim in mind: the destruction of Israel.⁹¹ On 26 May, in a speech to Egyptian Labour Unions, Nasser offered the most direct and frightening enunciation of Egypt's policy to date. The Arab world, he disclosed, was in the midst of a campaign to destroy Israel and should Israel, he warned,

launch a war, it will not be a limited war. Egypt will, thanks to this war, at long last wipe Israel off the face of earth. We have waited for this

moment for eleven long years. We have always said that a war over the Gulf [of Aqaba] would be a general war, and that we would embark upon it only if fully prepared.⁹²

Nasser was clearly determined to defeat and destroy Israel. Yet, incredibly, at the end of May Nasser suddenly put forward a solution to the crisis. He suggested that the Straits of Tiran should be recognized as part of the UAR's territorial waters. At the same time he called for the full implementation of all the 1949 ceasefire agreements including the article on the demilitarization of the Nitzana. Finally, he posited that Israel should withdraw from all the demilitarized zones, which did not belong to it, and that the UN should station its forces in these areas. Israel considered Nasser's terms utterly unacceptable. For one thing, they overturned the achievements of the Sinai campaign. For another, and even worse, they rewarded Nasser for his latest aggressive actions, thus consolidating his ill-gotten gains. Accordingly, it rejected the Egyptian leader's proposals out of hand.⁹³

Nasser was neither surprised nor displeased that his offer had been turned down. In fact, it is extremely doubtful whether his peace terms were a genuine attempt to resolve the crisis that was entirely of his own making. Nasser had no intention of abandoning his war plans. Thus, he told the Egyptian National Assembly on 29 May that he had 'said in the past that we would decide the time and place [for war], and that in order to win we must first carefully prepare ourselves ... [the] preparations are in place. We are ready to confront Israel'.⁹⁴

In Nasser's view the Straits crisis was not really about the Gulf of Aqaba and Israel's right of passage, but Israel's right to exist. Egypt's return to Sinai and the closure of the Straits would, he believed, allow Egypt to turn the clock back and revert to the pre-1956 state of affairs. And this, to Nasser's mind, constituted the first step towards restoring the situation to what it had been before 1948 and the foundation of the Zionist state. All his recent actions had been part of a carefully formulated plan designed to achieve this end. Convinced that Israel was suffering under the burden of international isolation and aware of Israel's grim domestic situation, Nasser now began to glory in Israel's impending destruction.

Nasser's desire for war was not the result of some last minute whim. In fact, far from being forced into war by events, Nasser was following a well calculated and deliberate plan. Nasser knew from the word go that his uncompromising position on the Straits was totally unacceptable to Israel and a sure-fire recipe for war. Yet if war had been Nasser's objective all along why did he not attack Israel immediately? A surprise attack would, after all, have given him an undeniable and vital military advantage. Moreover, how is it possible to explain his constant and very public assurances that Egypt would not be the one to fire the first shot?⁹⁵

Anderson, for example, reported that during his conversation with Nasser the Egyptian president was most insistent that 'he would not begin any fight but wait until the Israelis moved in'.⁹⁶ Finally, why did Nasser agree in early June to the American suggestion that he send his vice-president, Zakaria Muhieddin, to Washington, and that, at the same time, the American vice-president, Hubert Humphrey, travel to Cairo in a last-ditch effort to resolve the crisis. Richard Nolte, for one, was firmly convinced that Muhieddin's visit offered a genuine opportunity to find a constructive solution to the Straits problem.⁹⁷

There are several reasons why Nasser chose not to initiate hostilities. First, and in complete accordance with his strategy, Nasser wanted to make absolutely sure that his army was in place and fully prepared for the battle. Second, Nasser was in no rush. Israel's situation was extremely bleak - its economy was at a standstill, its public dispirited and dejected and its government seemingly impotent. Nasser believed all this could only deteriorate the longer the crisis continued. Thus, any delay worked to Egypt's advantage. Finally, there was Nasser's overweening and arrogant self-confidence. Nasser was certain that he could easily and quickly crush Israel. As he told Anderson, there was a danger that Israel would take action against Egypt but 'elaborate plans [had] been made for instant retaliation and ... he was confident of the outcome of a conflict between the Arabs and Israel'.⁹⁸

Nasser was too sober-minded, too rational and too prudent a leader to take hasty, ill-considered measures. Innately cautious, the Egyptian president had never done anything without carefully thinking through the consequences of his actions. Ever since the end of the Suez campaign, he had been careful not to be dragged into an untimely war against Israel. War there would be, but only when Egypt and the Arab world were ready. In May 1967 Nasser decided that the time was ripe for the final showdown with Israel. Hence his decision to build-up his forces in Sinai and his decision to expel the UNEF. Hence his decision to close the Straits to Israeli shipping and his efforts to isolate Israel by insisting that Egypt would not initiate hostilities, thus avoiding a repetition of 1956, when Britain and France fought by Israel's side.

Nasser's goal through all this was not to raise his waning prestige in the Arab world, though this was of course a welcome by-product of the affair. Nor was he indulging in political manoeuvres; and he was certainly not dragged unwittingly into war. Rather, Nasser was following a predetermined and deliberate strategy, its aim to once and for all close the Arab account with the Zionist state. Any other interpretation of Nasser's actions simply underestimates the Egyptian president's proven political abilities and worth, and as such does the Egyptian leader a grave, unwarranted and unmerited disservice .

NOTES

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47. In this connection see an article in *Ha'aretz*, 10 May 1967; Also Segeuv, *Israel, the Arabs and the Great Powers*, Tel Aviv, 1968, p.71; Whelings, 'Dilemma of a Superpower', p.189; Damascus to FO, 13 May 1967, FO 17/474.
48. Y. Bar Siman–Tov, *Israel, the Superpowers and the War in the Middle East*, New York, 1987, p.92; Dayan, *Story of My Life*, p.392.

49. The Soviets had passed along this information as early as 29 April, using the offices of the chairman of the Egyptian Parliament, Anawar Sadat. See Sadat, *Identity*, p.172; Heikal, *The Cairo Documents*, p.217, and *Sphinx*, p.174.
50. E. Zisser, 'Between Syria and Israel: The Six Day War and its Aftermath', *Iyunim Bitkumat Israel*, Vol.8 (1998), pp.178–4 (Hebrew); Parker, *Politics of Miscalculations*, pp.43–4; R.B. Parker, 'The June 1967 War: Some Mysteries Explored', *The Middle East Journal*, Vol.46, No.2 (1992), p.181.
51. In early 1960, following the rise in tension along the Syrian border, and fearing Israeli retaliatory action, Egypt sent three divisions into the Sinai. Israel, in response, secretly mobilized its reserve force and armoured corps. On this occasion, however, the Great Powers intervened, allowing the two sides to retreat from their respective positions, without loss of face. See New York to FO, 25 February 1960 and Cairo to FO, 22–23 February 1960, FO 371/1551207.
52. Bar Siman–Tov, *Superpowers*, p.86; Rabin, *Service Notes*, Tel Aviv, 1979, pp.134–45 (Hebrew).
53. W.B. Quandt, *Decade of Decisions*, p.201.
54. FO to New York, 16 May 1967, FCO 17/479.
55. FO to Washington, 16 May 1967, PREM 13/1617; Jerusalem to London, 16 May 1967, ISA, Hez/5/4080.
56. Parker, 'The June War', p.181; Yost, 'How it Began', p.309.
57. Minute by FO, 24 March 1966, FO 371/186864.
58. Cairo to FO and minute by MacLean, 7 March 1966, FO 371/186430.
59. A. Cohen, 'Cairo, Dimona and the June 1967 War', *Middle East Journal*, Vol.50, No.2 (Spring 1996), pp.196–7; See for example, *Ha'aretz*, 21 February, 30 March and 18 April 1966.
60. State Department (Hereafter SD), to Cairo, 27 May 1967, National Archives, Washington (hereafter NA), RG 59/1790.
61. Cairo to SD, 2 June 1967, NA, RG59/1790; Anderson to Johnson, 2 June 1967, NA, RG59/1792.
62. Cairo to SD, 2 June 1967, NA, RG59/1790.
63. Dayan, *Story of My Life*, p.392; Rabin, *Service Notes*, p.136; Yitzaki, *In Arab Eyes*, pp.90–92.
64. Heikal, *Cairo Documents*, pp.217–18.
65. B. Geist, 'The Six Day War: The Decision Making Process in Foreign Policy in Conditions of Crisis', *State and Government and International Relations*, Vol.8 (1975), p.62 (Hebrew); M. Brecher, *Decisions in Israel's Foreign Policy*, London, 1974, p.364.
66. Eshkol to Wilson and Washington to FO, 18 May 1967, PREM 13/1617; Jerusalem to London, 18 May 1967, ISA, Hez/5/4080.
67. Haber, *War Will Break*, p.153.
68. Dayan, *Story of My Life*, p.399; Rabin, *Service Notes*, pp.148–9.
69. Foreign Ministry Research Department, 22 May 1967, ISA, Hez/11/4088. Two passageways, running through the Straits of Tiran, between the Island of Tiran and the Sinai Peninsula, provide the sole access to the Port of Eilat. The first is 0.7 miles wide and the second 0.5 miles. The distance between the Egyptian and Saudi Arabian coastlines, at the point closest to the Island of Tiran, is 10.5 miles and, at one point, slightly to the north, only 6.3 miles. Sharm el Sheik is the land point closest to the passageway and directly overlooks the Straits.
70. A. Eban, *Memoirs*, Tel Aviv, 1978, p.322; G. Rafael, *Destination Peace: Three Decades of Israeli Foreign Policy*, Tel Aviv, 1981, p.131; Brecher, *Decisions*, p.372; Giest, 'The Six Day War', p.62
71. Y. Bar–On, 'The Rise and Fall of Friendship: French–Israeli relations, 1956–1967', *State, Government and International Relations*, Vol.34, No.35 (1991), pp.68, 89–90 (Hebrew).
72. Wilson to Eshkol, 21 May 1967, PREM 13/1617.
73. *Knesset Debates*, Vol.49, 22 May 1967; Eban, *Memoirs*, p.325.
74. Gilbo'a, *Six Years*, p.118; Bar Siman–Tov, *Superpowers*, p.101.
75. *Al Abram*, 24 May 1967; Parker, *Politics of Miscalculations*, pp.47–8, 72–5; A. Ayalon, 'The Road to the Six Day War', *Skira Hodshit*, Vol.5 (1986), p.8 (Hebrew).
76. Sadat, *Search of Identity*, p.172.
77. Parker, *Politics of Miscalculations*, p.32.

78. Gilbo'a, *Six Years*, p.198. The British–Canadian proposal called for the establishment of an international force, which would come under the authority of the ceasefire committee. The force was to be stationed on both sides of the border that was also on Israeli territory. In addition, there was also to be a demilitarized zone along the Egyptian–Israeli border, with both Israel and Egypt withdrawing their forces from the area.
79. Sadat, *Search for Identity*, p.172; P.J. Vatikiotis, *Nasser and His Generation*, London, 1978, pp.255–6; L.L. Wheten, *The Canal War: Four Power Conflict in the Middle East*, Cambridge, 1974, p.40; Cohen, 'Cairo, Dimona', p.201.
80. Mutawi, *Jordan*, pp.88–9, 96; Stephans, *Nasser*, p.477.
81. Glassman, *Arms for the Arabs*, pp.35–6; Vatikiotis, *Nasser and His Generation*, p.256.
82. Glassman, *Arms for the Arabs*, p.25; El Hussinin, *Soviet–Egyptian Relations*, p.141.
83. A. Yodfat, *The Soviet Union and the Middle East*, Tel Aviv, 1973, pp.44–5 (Hebrew)
84. *Ibid.*, p.41; Glassman, *Arms for the Arabs*, pp.24–5; Burns, *Economic Aid*, p.141.
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86. Minute by Spears, 30 May 1967, FO 39/250; Tibi, *Conflict and War*, p.70.
87. P. Mangold, *Superpower Intervention in the Middle East*, London, 1979, p.117; Glassman, *Arms for the Arabs*, pp.25–6.
88. See for example, *Knesset Debates*, Vol.22, 4 March 1967.
89. Haber, *War Will Break*, p.164; Rabin, *Service Notes*, pp.154–5.
90. *Ibid.*; see also interview with Eshkol in *Ma'ariv*, 4 October 1967.
91. Washington to FO, 17 May and Tel Aviv to FO, 18 May 1967, FCO 17/479; Mutawi, *Jordan in the 1967 War*, pp.94–5.
92. *Al Abram*, 27 May 1967.
93. Gilbo'a, *Six Years*, p.192; Rabin, *Service Notes*, p.169.
94. Parker, *Politics of Miscalculations*, p.54; *Al Abram*, 30 May 1967.
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97. Cairo to SD, 4 June 1967, NA RG/59/1790.
98. Cairo to SD, 2 June 1967, NA, RG59/1792.