

## The Six Day War

By David Tal

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It took three weeks of waiting and six days of fighting to change the face of the Middle East. The military countdown to the war started on May 15, 1967, with the crossing of the first Egyptian tanks from the [Suez Canal](#) into the Sinai. Although this action surprised Israel, it was closely related to tensions and military clashes that had taken place much earlier along Israel's borders, especially with Jordan and Syria. The 1956 [Suez War](#) had ended with Israel having to withdraw from the [Sinai Peninsula](#) and the Tiran Straits, but with two major achievements: First, the Eisenhower administration pledged to Israel that the United States would regard the re-closure of the Straits by Egypt as a *casus belli* that would allow Israel to act in accordance with [Article 51](#) of the United Nations Charter concerning self-defense. The second was the placement of UN observers (the United Nations Emergency Force, UNEF) along the Israeli-Egyptian border.

This was significant in itself, but as it happened, after the Suez War the infiltrations into Israel – mainly from the [Gaza Strip](#) and Jordanian [West Bank](#) – almost completely stopped. The vast majority of these were Palestinians who crossed the border for various reasons - in particular to steal. Israel reacted fiercely, sometimes launching military attacks on targets in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Soon the tensions along the Israel-Jordanian and Israeli-Egyptian borders seemed to dissipate.

New sources of friction quickly replaced old ones – most of them occurring along the Israeli-Syrian border. One reason for this was Syria's challenge to Israel's claims of sovereignty over disputed pieces of land across their common border, which Israel had insisted on cultivating. The agricultural value of these bits of land was extremely small, but Israel was not ready to give up what it considered to be lawful land, even if the price was armed clashes and mutual bombardment.

Tension was further heightened by Syria's attempts to divert the headwaters of the Jordan River - Israel's major source of water. This was followed by the Israel Defense Forces' (IDF) retaliatory destruction of Syria's water diversion equipment. Another source of friction was the hospitality Syria showed to Palestinian organizations, which had been launching repeated terror attacks against Israel since January 1965. The growing intensity of the conflict led the Israeli government and the [IDF](#) high command to seek an excuse to inflict a heavy blow on Syrian forces.

This opportunity arose when Palestinian guerrillas blew up a water-pumping station in northern Israel on April 1, 1967. Prime Minister [Levi Eshkol](#) instructed the IDF chief of staff, General [Yitzhak Rabin](#), to respond with strong force. On April 7, Israel provoked an incident along the border. This led to a heavy exchange of fire, culminating in an Israeli Air Force

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Contact Info

Feedback

Glossary

Israel & the States

Links

News

Publications

Search

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(IAF) operation that paralyzed Syria's firing positions on the [Golan Heights](#) and downed six Syrian MIG jets.

This was followed by heated declarations against Syria by senior Israeli officials, adding fuel to an already overheated situation. In a media interview, General Rabin made an unequivocal threat against Damascus, whose "authorities are behind the terrorists," hinting that Israel's actions against Syria were aimed at bringing about a change in regime. The prime minister, while chastising the chief of staff, added to the turmoil by claiming that "the last 14 incidents might lead us to take measures no less harsh than those taken on April 7th."

The Arab response came from an unexpected quarter: On May 14, 1967, Egyptian military forces crossed the Suez Canal and massed in the Sinai Peninsula. Shortly afterward, the Egyptian president, [Gamal Abed al-Nasser](#), demanded that UN Secretary-General U Thant remove the UNEF from their positions along the Israeli-Egyptian border.

While it is known what led Nasser to act against Israel, it is unclear whether he saw his actions as leading to war. Nasser's reasons included the tensions along the Israeli-Syrian border and his own weakening position in the Arab world.

Since the mid-1950s [Nasser](#) had carried the banner of pan-Arabism in order to claim Egypt's primacy in the Arab world. To advance Egypt's role as the senior state, Egyptian agents undermined pro-western rulers such as Jordan's King Hussein. The highlight of Egypt's pan-Arab campaign was the creation of the United Arab Republic, a political alliance of Egypt and Syria in 1958. However, this had never taken on a proper structure and did not last long – it was terminated in 1961. Furthermore, with the escalation of military clashes between Israel and Syria, Nasser's reluctance to come to Syria's aid, even if it meant going to war against Israel, exposed him to strong criticism and from the Syrian government.

At the beginning of 1967, following the escalation along the Israeli-Syrian front, the Soviet government delivered a message of warning to Syria and Egypt, claiming that Israel was massing troops along its border with Syria with the intention of launching a major attack. This report was actually completely false and the Israeli attempts to convince the Soviet ambassador in Tel Aviv to come and see this for himself failed. It is unclear what motivated the Soviets to issue such an erroneous report. Existing explanations are unsubstantiated and it remains a mystery. Nasser, however, could not remain passive in view of a alleged prospective attack against a sister state, especially having signed a Syrian-Egyptian defense treaty in November of 1966.

It is commonly assumed that Nasser ordered his troops into the Sinai to send a strong message of deterrence to Israel about its alleged prospective attack on Syria. Nasser most likely did not expect U Thant to react so quickly to his demand to remove the [UNEF](#) as, according to latter's terms of deployment, the Security Council would have needed to discuss such a request. Thus, the argument goes, Nasser found himself in a situation in which he had to escalate his actions and rhetoric even if this was not his original intention.

This would explain Nasser's most dramatic act after sending troops into the Sinai – his closure of the Tiran Straits. While this was an obvious *casus belli*, [Nasser](#) put himself in a situation where he had almost no choice given the rapid withdrawal of the UNEF from the area. Now that the whole Sinai was under his control, with no foreign forces present, he could not allow Israeli naval traffic to continue through the Straits. Evidence that Nasser probably did not plan the closure of the Straits in advance is found in the absence of any clear action to do so. He placed no troops there, nor any military equipment that would enforce such a closure.

The entry of Egyptian forces into the Sinai came as a surprise to the IDF's Intelligence

branch. Their predominant assumption was that because Egypt was entangled in the Yemenite civil war, Nasser would not open a new front against Israel. Nevertheless, the improbable had happened and Israel now had to guess what Nasser's intentions might be. Although General Aharon Yariv, head of the Intelligence Branch, still postulated that Nasser did not want an all-out war with Israel, he concluded that Egypt's intention was to wear Israel down or perhaps initiate limited military action. General Rabin reiterated the same themes in front of the cabinet; noting on May 22 that the Egyptian formation was defensive and there were no signs that Nasser intended to go to war against Israel. The common feeling in the government was similar.

Even if the Egyptians did not plan an attack, however, their massive build-up in the Sinai forced Israel to prepare for any eventuality. The government decided to accept Foreign Minister [Abba Eban](#)'s recommendation to begin a diplomatic campaign aimed at defusing the crisis. Choosing a diplomatic strategy was not only what the Israeli government considered logical, but was influenced by the response of its allies – foremost of which was the United States.

Washington called on Jerusalem to show restraint and not to attack and President Johnson himself set the course of Israel's decision-making for the coming days. In a message to Eshkol on May 17, Johnson expressed "sympathy and understanding" for Israel in the face of the crisis, but asked the prime minister to refrain from any military action without prior consultation with the United States. He reiterated this in a personal letter sent later to Eshkol, adding: "I am sure that you will understand that I cannot accept any responsibility on behalf of the United States for situations which arise as the result of actions on which we were not consulted." These words were a clear message to Israel to act carefully, even in the later stages of the crisis when war seemed inevitable. Johnson's admonition was also promising, however, as it did imply that under certain circumstances the U.S. would back Israeli military action.

Israel attempted to force Washington to comply with commitments made by the Eisenhower administration following Israel's withdrawal from the Sinai in 1957. In a "most important telegram" to Eugene Rostow of the State Department, Eban recalled the undertakings of the U.S. in 1957 in regard to Israel's security calling it, "the most explicit and solemn [undertaking] ever done by our two governments in the framework of a US general commitment to Israel's security and integrity." Israel now sought a public declaration from the US about its commitment to Israel's security that would counter the Soviet support of Egypt and Syria and serve as a deterrent.

Washington's approach was cautious. The president and his aides accepted Israel's basic perception about the origins of the crisis and Rostow agreed with Israeli diplomats that the Syrian government was to be blamed for the current tension, as it had allowed terror groups to use Syrian bases to carry out terror attacks in Israel. As L. B. Johnson's letter to Eshkol showed however, Washington was demanding what amounted to a right of veto over Israeli action.

While complaining that the Johnson administration was "insufficiently sensitive to our feelings," Eban and Israeli diplomats clearly understood the true meaning of what they were hearing in Washington. In spite of Israel's complaints, the two governments maintained an open channel throughout the crisis. Meetings were held between high-ranking officials from both nations and the Americans kept the Israelis informed about their activities. The Israelis increased their cooperation with the administration; a necessary step not only in the immediate context of the crisis, but also because of its potential for the future relationship.

The most dramatic point of the crisis – and for Israel, the most significant – was Nasser's

announcement at midnight on May 22 that the [Straits of Tiran](#) would be closed to Israeli shipping. The Closure of the straits were followed by Nasser's inflammatory speeches directed against Israel, speeches that made his actions even more ominous. Nasser's move played to Israel's advantage, as the real problem at that time was the growing number of Egyptian troops in the Sinai – which, by May 21, consisted of some 80,000 Egyptian soldiers.

This accumulation of forces compelled the IDF to mobilize 80,000 reserve soldiers. Israel could not sustain such a force for long, but Nasser apparently had no intention of bringing the crisis to an end. He announced that he would not attack Israel, yet he seemed ready to exploit to the full the benefits of his brinkmanship without having to go to war.

The main problem was that it would be difficult for Israel to justify a pre-emptive attack in response to Egypt's military build-up. The blockade of the [Straits of Tiran](#) offered a way out of this dilemma, as Israel's right to free passage through the area was widely accepted, especially since its withdrawal from the Sinai after 1956. The closure gave Israel a justifiable reason to go to war, despite the fact Israel's real concern was the massive Egyptian build-up.

Israel's claim that the closure of the Straits was a *casus belli* put it in a delicate situation, as it now had no choice but to go to war. Rabin stressed this point to the government when he said: "What is in question today is not the passage through the Tiran and the freedom of navigation, but Israel's ability to act on what it declared was its right to self-defense. [...] If there is no response, it is impossible to predict the results, as Israel will lose its deterrent capability." Hence, this was the time to abandon the policy of restraint and to give the IDF an order – or permission – to attack.

Rabin however remained ambiguous when asked if immediate action was essential. Eban set the tone for a decision. He reminded the government that it was essential to achieve "a warm understanding with the United States. [...] Otherwise, we might win the war, but once again lose the fruits of the victory." Consequently, the cabinet decided that the closure of the Straits of Tiran to Israeli shipping was an act of aggression against Israel, but postponed its reaction in order to allow the foreign minister to go to Washington to meet with President Johnson.

While Eban was on his way, the Egyptians strengthened their build-up, which on May 25 had reached four infantry and two armored divisions, bringing their total number of tanks in the Sinai to 800. Cairo even called troops back from Yemen and suddenly the Egyptian forces' deployment had shifted from defensive to offensive posture. It now seemed that Nasser was planning a full war against Israel; an assumption that was also based on the massive increase in Syrian troops along the northern border with Israel. Iraqi forces joined the Syrians and Jordan asked for Iraqi and Saudi reinforcements.

As if this were not enough, Nasser addressed a meeting of the Arab Labor Association, in which he declared that the aim of the united Arab war was the destruction of the State of Israel.

The Americans disagreed with the Israelis on this matter. When Eban told the president about Eshkol's estimation that "Nasser is ready for an imminent all-out attack together with Syria," Secretary of Defense [Robert McNamara](#) responded that "we see neither the capability nor the intention of imminent offensive action" by Nasser. President Johnson went further, claiming that even if Israel were attacked, "our judgment is that the Israelis would lick them." Other than that, he agreed that Israel should not be banned from the Straits and that it had a right to self-defense. As much as he stood by Israel, however, Johnson had to obtain both American and international public support for this position, and this could be achieved only when diplomatic activity had been exhausted.

Johnson encouraged Eban to recruit more and more Congressmen to side with Israel and in



the meantime, the president would do all he could to establish an international armada that would force the opening of the Tiran Straits. Even if this effort was doomed, it had to be tried. He approved military cooperation and intelligence-sharing between the two countries and concluded: "I must emphasize the necessity for Israel not to make itself responsible for the initiation of hostilities. Israel will not be alone unless it decides to do it alone. We cannot imagine that it will make this decision."

Although the meeting ended with some misunderstanding on the part of the Israeli government as to the nature of the assistance promised by the U.S. in the case of war, the Israelis nevertheless got what they wanted. While they did not obtain direct permission to start a conflict, Johnson agreed that Israel was right in principle and laid down in quite precise language the terms for a possible Israeli action after diplomatic activity had been exhausted. If this sequence were maintained, the administration would be able to stand by Israel. Washington also implicitly accepted the time limit set by Israel and acted on the assumption that there was only "a week or two" (Eshkol's words to Johnson) in which to organize an international naval force. The president regarded the timetable as a working thesis, not as a threat, and the Israelis were systematically informed about the United States' activities and difficulties.

While the administration was busy trying to pull together an international task force, the response in Israel to the Johnson–Eban meeting was mixed. General Yariv estimated that time was now working to Egypt's advantage and Israel's disadvantage, as Nasser had moved "from a state of reluctance to go to war to a state of reluctance to initiate a war, but readiness to be involved in one." Consequently, General Rabin told the war cabinet that their ability to carry out a surprise attack on Egypt – a crucial element in the army's war plans – was diminishing with the lapse of time.

Opinions in the government were equally divided between those in favor and those against going to war immediately. Some ministers agreed with Eshkol that diplomatic activity should first be tried, while others called for a rapid strike. Haim Gevaty, minister of agriculture, warned, "If we will not be the first to strike, Nasser will eliminate us." Other ministers, among them [Yigal Allon](#) and Israel Galili, supported him. Eshkol, however, insisted on waiting, a decision influenced by a series of telegrams coming from Johnson and the State Department that repeatedly asked Israel not to attack and stressed Washington's vigorous and continuous activity to set up an armada. On May 28, the prime minister told Johnson that the government had decided to prolong the waiting period.

This decision sparked a stormy attack on Eshkol both by the IDF high command and the Israeli public. He was accused of putting Israel in a grave situation, of exposing its weakness in a way that severely undermined its deterrent ability and of "destroying the wonderful people's spirit." The IDF generals charged that the delay endangered the country and even though they were confident in the IDF's ability to win, they made it clear that a later action would be much more costly than an earlier one.

Eshkol rejected this criticism. Justifying his decision, he said: "All the IDF's material has been gained by our [diplomatic] exertion. We must not forget that, and we should not see ourselves as Goliaths. With unarmed and unequipped fists, we have no power." In addition, Israel's ability to get what it needed for its safety and existence was dependent on its association with a great power.

Matters got even worse for Eshkol. Rumors about the harsh meeting spread throughout the country and this only added to the national feelings of insecurity and apprehension. These were intensified by an incident that took place before a meeting with the IDF general staff. The prime minister made a public address on the radio to explain the situation to the people

of Israel. He stumbled and stammered during his speech, creating an impression of indecisiveness and a lack of confidence.

On the external front, Jordan and Egypt signed a defense agreement on May 30, which meant that a war would not be restricted to only Egypt and Syria. Public opinion in Israel became agitated and readers sent letters to the daily papers comparing the Eshkol government's handling of the crisis with the debacle of Chamberlain and Munich. A "Churchill" was called to take "Chamberlain's" place. The "Churchill" figure was personified in [Moshe Dayan](#), a protégé of Eshkol's bitter political enemy, David Ben-Gurion – Israel's first prime minister. The public pressure led Dayan to be appointed defense minister on June 1, in place of Eshkol.

The internal turbulence notwithstanding, the road to war had been already charted. Officials in Washington met Israeli diplomats more than once a day, passing on up-to-date reports of the United States' attempts to put together an armada. Israeli diplomats also heard from their own sources that these efforts were futile and that Washington and London had failed to mobilize other nations to form an international naval strike force.

It became obvious that the administration's alternative to war had failed. It was now time to take the final step. Eshkol sent a letter to Johnson in which he recalled that Israel had adopted a waiting policy and refrained from military response to allow the U.S. to take concrete diplomatic measures "to meet the challenge of the illegal blockade, the aggressive build-up of Egyptian forces on our southern frontier, and the continuation of terrorist incursions into Israeli territory." What he was saying, in fact, was that with the American failure, Israel's hands were no longer tied.

The director of the Mossad, [Meir Amit](#), was sent to Washington and was informed of the administration's failure to build an armada; the implication was clear to both sides. Amit met with Richard Helms, the CIA director, and presented Israel's view of the crisis and of Nasser's intentions and estimated that the on-going diplomatic campaign would lead nowhere. Helms and his colleagues concurred. Even more important was Secretary of Defense McNamara's admission that this was indeed the case. McNamara responded with skepticism to Amit's query about the build-up of the naval force and "read very carefully" the Mossad director's presentation and analysis of the situation. Amit returned from his mission on the eve of June 3, reporting to his government that there were no signs of an American military or marine build-up and if Israel linked its planned military operation to the Straits issue, U.S. approval was anticipated. Eshkol and the government now felt that Israel could go to war with the tacit blessing of the United States.

The [IDF](#) was ready for war. It was not only the three weeks of waiting since the beginning of the crisis that had prepared the army for the challenge; the IDF's strategy and planning had been decided a long time beforehand. In the years following the 1956 War, the IDF had undergone changes in two major areas: Planning and doctrine. After the 1948 War, the IDF had been an infantry-based military. The [1956 Sinai War](#) demonstrated the power of the armored corps, which became the IDF's main ground force. The greater prominence of armored brigades allowed the design and execution of a plan that fitted Israel's security concept and was formulated by Ben-Gurion, who had been minister of defense as well as prime minister.

Based on the premise that Israel had no strategic depth and hence could not sustain a surprise attack, the post-1956 War doctrine was based on three arms: A strong air force that would destroy the enemy's air power and deprive it of the capability of striking Israel's civic centers, a strong armored corps that would storm the enemy and destroy its ground forces and an effective intelligence branch that would provide early warning of Arab intentions. At

the heart of this military doctrine was the assumption that, in the face of an expected Arab attack, the IDF would be the first to strike.

In June 1967, the war machine that had been built up during the previous decade was ready. The intelligence corps, however, failed to provide the warning in time. It was taken by surprise, just like everyone else, when the Egyptian army's crossing of the Suez Canal was observed. The Sinai Peninsula, however, was large enough to give Israel time to get ready. The fact that Nasser was in no hurry to attack also played in Israel's favor, allowing the IDF to execute its plan based on pre-emptive attack. Thus, when the order came, both the strategy and the armed forces were ready.

During those three weeks of waiting, the Egyptians had sent approximately 80,000 Egyptian soldiers into the Sinai, equipped with 850 tanks and 700 artillery pieces, deployed in eight divisions. Israel was ready with about 250 fighter jets and 600 tanks and three divisions deployed in the south. Forces were massed on other fronts as well and on both sides of Israel's borders. In the central front, facing Jordan, the IDF had deployed four brigades. The Jordanians had seven brigades with about 250 tanks - most of them in rear positions or in the east bank of the river Jordan. Further north, facing the Syrians, the IDF was ready with three brigades. The Syrians had moved up five brigades equipped with 250 tanks.

On June 5, at 7 a.m., almost all Israeli war planes – about 200 of them – took off from their bases and headed west and then south, toward targets in Egypt. Only a dozen IAF combat jets remained behind. Their arrival took the Egyptians completely by surprise. Israeli planes hit Egyptian airports and destroyed the entire Egyptian air force within three hours. Later that day the IAF destroyed the other Arab air forces – Syrian, Jordanian and part of the Iraqi air force.

An hour after the first Israeli planes took off, three Israeli divisions crossed the Israeli-Egyptian border, moving ahead along three main routes: One to the north and one to the south, facing massive Egyptian positions, while the third slipped through between the two Egyptian fortifications. Major-General Israel Tal led the division in the north against the Rafah fortifications while General Ariel Sharon led the southern incursion, aimed at the second Egyptian line of defense in the Jabl-Livni-Bir-Gafgafa area, in the center of the Sinai. General Avraham Yoffe led his division through the desert – an area that the Egyptians had regarded as impassable for an army – between Tal's and Sharon's divisions and attacked the Egyptian stronghold of Umm Katif-Kusseima-Abu Ageilla.

The three divisions accomplished their goals of cracking the first and second Egyptian lines within two days. Israel's military strategy was established up to this stage: Breaking down the Egyptian strongholds facing Israel. The next phase was outlined in vague terms: To destroy as much as possible of Egypt's military strength.

After successfully punching through Egypt's first and second lines, it was necessary to decide how to proceed. Dayan did not want the IDF to reach the Suez Canal, as he did not wish to extend the conflict by controlling an international marine thoroughfare. With the accelerated withdrawal of the Egyptian troops from the Sinai, however, he had to decide whether to crush the Egyptian troops or to allow them to cross the canal safely back to Egypt. To achieve the first objective the IDF had to take up positions close to the canal that would allow Israeli troops to intercept the retreating Egyptian forces. Despite the long-range repercussions of such a decision, Dayan decided in favor of short-term gain and directed the IDF to take up positions near the canal that would enable the destruction of the Egyptian army. He was afraid that the safe return of most of the Egyptian troops would encourage Nasser to continue the fighting. As for the political ramifications that would result from Israel taking control of one bank of the Suez Canal, Israel would deal with that later. In fact, Israel never did with

the consequences of that move.

Concurrently with breaking the back of the Egyptian military, Israeli forces moved during June 7 to Sharm-al-Sheikh, overlooking the Tiran Straits, to gain control over the point that to a great extent had provided the trigger for the war.

Israel's main focus during the early hours of June 6 was the fighting in the south. Under the Israeli war plan, Israel would not go to war against Jordan and Syria despite the fact that they had a military pact with Nasser. Israel had even transmitted a message to King Hussein before the war started, warning him not to attack Israel. Hussein was not willing to listen. Torn between his understanding that going to war against Israel would cost him dearly as well as the knowledge that his political and even personal survival depended on joining the battle, Hussein decided to go to war. What may have influenced his decision were the false reports that the Egyptian air force had repelled Israel's aerial assault and was attacking targets in Israel. Additionally, in accordance with Egypt and Jordan's military pact, the Jordanian army had been put under the command of an Egyptian commander, who was pushing for it to join the war.

The Jordanians acted along three fronts: Their artillery shelled west Jerusalem, IAF bases and the outskirts of Tel Aviv; their combat jets attacked targets within Israel, but caused only minor damage; and some Jordanian troops started moving toward the UN headquarters in south Jerusalem, while tank brigades rolled westward from the Jordan Valley. These two last developments were most worrisome to Jerusalem. Israel did not want to go to war with Jordan and on June 5 it had no operational plan for doing so. The only relevant concrete plan concerned Mount Scopus, which housed the [Hebrew University](#) and [Hadassah Hospital](#). After the [1948 War](#), these had remained in an enclave under Israeli control but completely surrounded by Jordanian-held territory. The special arrangements to allow the delivery of supplies to the Israeli force that guarded the hill had held for about twenty years, despite occasional incidents.

Israeli military planning on the central front had concentrated on the threat of a Jordanian attempt to take over Mount Scopus. When the Israeli high command noticed the movement of Jordanian ground forces in southern Jerusalem, despite the fact that they were not at that time directed against Mount Scopus, the Israelis were afraid that the strategic enclave would be the next target. This concern led the government to approve the IDF acting to prevent the fall of Mount Scopus, a decision that meant that the Israeli army would take control of the roads leading up to it. This, in turn, entailed the occupation first of the territories to the north of the mountain and then of the area to the south - that is, east Jerusalem. Soon, the occupation of east Jerusalem became a target in and of itself.

While the parachute brigade was in combat around Jerusalem, Dayan wanted to avoid a battle inside the [Old City](#) - both to limit unnecessary casualties (his assumption was that it would be enough to lay siege to the Old City to bring about its fall) and to avoid damage to the extremely sensitive holy sites within its walls. The lure of finally occupying the Old City was too tempting, however and the commander of the Israeli parachute brigade, after clearing the area around the Old City, pressed into it. On June 6 the IDF occupied the Old City and the Israeli flag was hoisted above the Western Wall.

At the same time, the IDF was taking steps to stop the shelling of the coastal plain by Jordanian artillery in the northern part of the [West Bank](#). An operation that was initially aimed at stopping the shelling ended two days later on June 7, with the complete occupation of the West Bank - an unplanned achievement. This occupation led to the flight and deportation of tenths of thousands of Palestinians from their homes to the east side of the Jordan River, in a repetition of the events of 1948. This time, though, both Israeli and



American officials acted with haste to stop the movement of people, preventing the recurrence of another Palestinian refugee problem in the magnitude of the 1948 war refugee problem.

The main Israeli war effort took place during the first 24 hours of fighting. The task of breaking-up the Egyptian lines of defense and fortifications, from Rafah in the north to Kuseima in the south, proved laborious. However, on Tuesday morning, the second day of the war, Israeli forces cracked the Egyptian defenses and were ready to continue their journey into the Sinai, moving into the unplanned phase of the war where the goal was to destroy the backbone of the Egyptian military. This was not to be an easy endeavor because, in spite of its initial losses, the main body of the Egyptian army amassed during the preceding three weeks remained intact and ready to continue the battle. Egypt suffered the significant disadvantage of lack of any air support, now that the Egyptian air force was smashed. The Israelis, on the other hand, could give their ground troops air cover without having to worry about enemy planes. Nonetheless, Egyptian commanders in the Sinai were ready to confront the Israeli army.

It was Egypt's own chief commander who frustrated their plans. After a few hours of fabricated euphoria, the recognition of the extent of Egyptian losses sustained under the Israeli air attack caused panic among the Egyptian high command and especially for its high commander, Muhammed Abed-al-Hakim Amer. His goal became to rescue the remaining Egyptian forces and prevent their further destruction. Historians have questioned the wisdom of General Amer's decision. After all, most of the Egyptian army remained intact in its positions and the vast majority of its pilots suffered no casualties. Their planes were destroyed on the ground, but the pilots were not in them. Friendly nations like Algeria sent replacement planes, giving the Egyptians an opportunity to regain at least some aerial strength. Amer would not relent, however, and insisted on withdrawing the remaining troops from the Sinai back to Egypt.

This order proved to be equally catastrophic. The retreat was disorganized and disorderly, with vast columns of Egyptian soldiers trying to find their way west amid huge traffic chaos. The trucks, tanks and armored personnel carriers proved to be sitting ducks for the Israeli war planes that attacked them on the long roads leading from the Sinai to the Suez Canal. About 10,000 Egyptian soldiers were killed and a larger number were wounded. Eighty percent of the Egyptian war machine was destroyed. Egypt's defeat was almost total.

In the midst of these events, a tragedy occurred when Israeli jets and boats attacked an American intelligence gathering ship. The USS Liberty was steaming about ten miles off the coast of El Arish, and on June 10th Israeli Jet Planes and Gun Boats attacked it. The Israelis argued that they had mistaken the American boat with an Egyptian one. As soon as the mistake was revealed, the Israelis stopped the attack, apologized and later on paid compensations. US government accepted the Israeli explanation, but still there were and still are those who charge that Israel launched the attack deliberately, knowing exactly who they were attacking.

To a great extent, the seeds of this war were actually planted along the Israeli-Syrian border. Ironically, the battle – at least in its first days – excluded Syria. In spite of a military pact with Egypt, the Syrians did not venture beyond shelling Israeli settlements from the mountainous ridge overlooking the Jordan Valley. On June 5, a small Syrian force initiated an attack on Israeli settlements just across the border, in the northern Galilee. This was meant to be a diversion to cover a full-fledged assault further south by three Syrian brigades. The diversion was poorly executed, however, and Israeli forces were able to thwart it quite easily. With that, the Syrian high command aborted the plan for the larger attack and Syrian ground troops took no further action.

Although they avoided a ground attack on Israel, Syrian artillery constantly bombarded the Israeli settlements across the Syrian border all over the Jordan Valley, raising the pressure on Israel to take some kind of retaliatory action. Prime Minister Eshkol strongly favored an attack that would bring the sources of the Jordan River under Israel's control. The [Jordan Valley settlers](#), who had been subjected to Syrian barrages for years, also pressed for an Israeli attack. Dayan, however, turned down these requests. His priority was the fighting in the south and, afterward, the evolving battle in the center. The northern front would have to wait.

A decision regarding the [Golan Heights](#) became easier after the events of June 8. On that day, the IDF completed the occupation of the West Bank and inflicted the final blow on the remaining Egyptian troops in the Sinai. The hasty rush of Egyptian troops westward forced them through the two passes, the Mitla and the Gidi, which became a death-trap for them. Retreating through these narrow valleys, they became easy prey for IDF planes and tanks. Dayan, in an attempt to avoid international pressure on Israel, was determined not to allow IDF troops to reach the Suez Canal, but he could not stop the rolling tanks that swiftly pursued the few escaping Egyptian troops. On June 9, Israeli soldiers reached the banks of the Suez Canal.

It took [Nasser](#) more than 24 hours to grasp what had happened to his army. Initially, he was led to believe the *Voice of the Arabs* radio reports that Egyptian anti-aircraft units and planes had managed to thwart the Israeli air strike, bringing down dozens of Israeli fighter jets. According to the radio, Egyptian forces were defeating Israelis on the ground. Nasser believed this. Twenty-four hours later, after learning the truth, he acted quickly, insisting first of all on a ceasefire and the immediate withdrawal of Israeli troops from the Sinai. This demand, which was rejected both by Israel and the United States, delayed the cease-fire, giving the Israelis more time to complete their missions. Only when Nasser realized that his conditions exposed his troops to further Israeli strikes, did he accept an unconditional cease-fire, on June 9. At that point, his army was completely destroyed and the whole Sinai Peninsula was in Israeli hands.

With the reduced fighting in the south and center, Syria became the major issue. Dayan still objected to an offensive move against the Syrians, even though they continued to bombard the Israeli settlements below them. He was worried about a possible Soviet reaction and that the coming cease-fire might restrict Israel before it could finish any move against the Syrians. The pressure from above and below only increased. Eshkol was in favor of a military response, as were some other ministers. The head of the northern command, [David Elazar](#), also pressed for action and the residents of the settlements sent representatives to Jerusalem to lobby for an IDF attack.

On the eve of June 9, the cabinet held a crucial meeting to decide whether or not to attack Syria. By that time, Egypt had accepted an unconditional cease-fire allowing the IDF to devote its full capacity to launch an attack. Dayan remained opposed, however, and presented several reasons against such a move: The threat of Soviet intervention the fear that occupying the Golan Heights would lead to unremitting Syrian retaliation and would completely destroy relations with France and any chance of getting replacement parts for Israeli airplanes damaged in the war. Dayan also worried that an offensive might lead to the creation of a renewed Arab front that would include Iraq and continue the fighting against Israel. As an alternative, Dayan even suggested removing the settlements that were within Syrian artillery range, but this was met with strong opposition.

Dayan insisted that military decisions were his sole prerogative and in the end the cabinet approved his recommendation. Ministers were therefore taken aback to hear the following morning, on June 10, that Dayan, without coming back to the cabinet, had instructed the IDF

to attack the Syrians. Dayan explained this reversal in terms of the clear signs that Egypt would not intervene if Israel attacked Syria and that there was some evidence of collapse among Syrian forces on the Golan Heights. One way or another he informed Eshkol of his decision and the surprised and angry prime minister had to agree to a policy that contradicted the cabinet decision of the previous evening. On the morning of June 10, the IDF stormed the mountains in the northeast and in spite of stubborn Syrian resistance, completed their mission the next day.

The last phase of the war was the energetic discussion in the UN Security Council on an acceptable text for a cease-fire resolution. This was agreed upon on June 10, at the same time as the final Israeli action on the Golan Heights and a message from [Soviet Prime Minister Kosygin](#) to President Johnson, threatening that if Israel did not stop its offensive, the Soviet Union would take measures against it, including military ones. In response, the president instructed the Sixth Fleet to move to the eastern Mediterranean, thereby sending an unobvious message to Moscow that the United States would not permit such a Soviet response.

On the evening of June 10, the rising tension dissipated as soon as the Israelis announced that they had accepted the cease-fire. Stationed on the banks of the Suez Canal and Jordan River and deep in the Syrian Heights, Israeli forces rested their weapons, bringing an end to the war that changed the face of the Middle East.

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[Table of Contents](#)